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Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent Appropriation of Local Grievances?

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ABSTRACT

The Tillabéri region in Niger has quickly lapsed into a state of violence and come under the control of 'violent entrepreneurs' – that is, non-state armed actors possessing some kind of political agenda, which is implemented in tandem with different types of income-generating activities. Violent entrepreneurs rule by force and violence, but they also distribute resources, provide some level of order and offer protection to (at least parts of) the population in the areas they control, or attempt to control. In many local communities in peripheral areas of the Sahel, these violent entrepreneurs have a stronger presence than international community actors and their national allies. This situation is partly the result of spill-over effects from the war in Mali and local herder-farmer conflicts, but the key factors are the ability of jihadi insurgents to appropriate local grievances and the failure of the state to resist this.

KEYWORDS

insurgencies; violence; governance; enabling environment; state failure

Tillabéri is the westernmost region of Niger, enclaving the capital region of Niamey. It is a relatively new administrative unit, established in its current form in September 2002. As is the case with many other conflict-affected parts of the Sahel, Tillabéri is a border region: Benin lies to its immediate south, Burkina Faso to the west and Mali to the north and the west. However, unlike the other regions rife with conflict in the tri-border zone of Liptako-Gourma, it is not a peripheral area in geographic terms. While its sister regions in Burkina Faso and Mali are located far away from their respective capitals, the city of Tillabéri, the administrative centre of the region, is no more than 130 kilometres from Niamey. Nonetheless, this region is currently the most violent and conflict-prone part of Niger. Until late 2019, Niger had been spared the violence that swept through large parts of Burkina Faso and Mali. The situation suddenly changed at the end of that year, as vividly illustrated by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) attack on the military base in Inates in December 2019 that left more than 70 Nigerien soldiers dead (*BBC* 2019).

This begs the question: Why Tillabéri? What is it about Tillabéri that made the region slide into a state of violence and displacement so quickly? There is little statistical evidence to suggest that this region has suffered more economic or political neglect than other regions in Niger (Nigerien National Institute of Statistics 2012; Tillabéri

Regional Development Plan 2016). The recent spread of violence in Tillabéri implies that yet another string of local communities, this time close to a capital city, has come under the influence of what we call ‘violent entrepreneurs’. These are non-state armed actors possessing some kind of political agenda, implemented in tandem with different types of income-generating activities. They rule by force and violence, but they also distribute resources, provide some level of order and offer protection to (at least parts of) the population in the areas they control, or attempt to control. Their presence in many communities in peripheral areas of the Sahel is stronger than that of international community actors and their national allies. Thus, understanding how local communities attempt to negotiate and navigate this new social landscape is crucial to dealing with the phenomenon.

Analytical framework

In order to answer the question asked above, we need to understand why large-scale violence has suddenly become such a defining characteristic of Tillabéri. Is it simply a consequence of the short distance to the border with Mali in combination with the fact that Niger is a weak state that cannot properly control all of its borders (Nsaibia and Weiss 2018; Eizenga 2019; Le Roux 2019): thus, a neighbourhood effect that increases the risk of violent conflict in proximate states (Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008; Dixon 2009)? If this is the case, Mali is the ‘black hole’ of the region into which weak neighbouring countries implode. The idea of regional implosion (Bøås 2003; Dokken 2008) is worth examining, but the weakness of this hypothesis is that it does not amount to much more than a description of what has happened. Insurgents spill over borders because they can, and neighbouring countries are too weak to resist.

Another explanation focuses on herder-farmer conflicts, which have a long history in many parts of the Sahel (Benjaminsen and Ba 2009), including Tillabéri. Claims have been made that the specific political economy of Tillabéri as a centre for cattle-breeding and transhumance, and the conflicts this has historically caused may offer some insight into how a region, while never entirely peaceful, has unravelled so rapidly into violence (Assanvo *et al.* 2019; ICG 2020). This hypothesis cannot easily be disregarded as contested herder-farmer relations constitute a source of local grievances as well as violent conflict in a number of places in the Sahel. However, we also need to understand how the weakness and dysfunctionality of the state imply that the sovereign power that is supposed to regulate such conflicts has, if not disappeared, become one among many actors who seek to govern in return for local support and profit. Therefore, we also have to investigate the other side of the coin, that is, how insurgents seek integration through the appropriation of local conflicts. To achieve this, we will employ the analytical framework proposed by Morten Bøås and Kevin Dunn (2017).

Their point of departure is that a conflict zone is defined not by the absence of governance, but rather by the coexistence of competing modes of governance. In fact, Bøås and Dunn argue that armed insurgencies are part of emerging systems of governance. Insurgencies do not exist in isolation from the political, social and economic dimensions of local systems of governance, nor do they necessarily eclipse those other dimensions. They tend to emerge in contexts where alternative modes of governance are in competition, leading to a shifting and, often, unstable landscape of authority and rule.

In some cases, armed insurgencies are but one manifestation of these emerging and competing systems of governance (see Bøås and Dunn 2017). For example, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) rise to prominence in parts of Northern Mali was directly related to its ability to exploit the fragmenting system of governance typified by the warlord system that preceded its ascendancy (see, for example, Raineri and Strazzari 2015). The question, therefore, is if the main insurgency in Tillabéri, that of ISGS, shares this characteristic. If this is the case, then treating it as a warlord movement or just a by-product of the global jihad could be highly misleading. In general, to focus exclusively on the military-strategic or religious dimensions of Sahel insurgencies would fail to capture the multiple functions that violence performs in this part of the world.

For various reasons – ranging from the vagrancies of economic neoliberalism to the loss of external patrons – the capacity of ruling elites to maintain the systems of reciprocity that the patron-client relationship relies on has been undermined. This has resulted in both a crisis of legitimacy for many ruling elites and the perceived bankruptcy of the established state system. As neopatrimonial practices become unstable, the established mode of governance is thrown into question and begins to fray. While the logic of neopatrimonialism remains vital, we now see multiple and conflicting networks emerging, often with each constructing a competing system of governance (Bøås and Dunn 2017; see also Raeymaekers 2014). One can argue that post-colonial systems were characterised by a degree of stability because of their parasitical relationship with formal state institutions. Today's networks, instead, are characterised by flexibility and adaptability, with actors competing for the role of nodal point between various networks of informal governance that collaborate, but also compete and at times are in violent conflict with each other over the issue of control (Bøås 2015a). Thus, a grounded understanding of the Tillabéri predicament requires both an awareness of the ongoing crises of established systems of governance and the realisation that these insurgencies reflect not the absence of authority but the emergence of alternative and competing modes of rule and governance.

Thus, following Bøås and Dunn (2017), we argue that the insurgencies in Tillabéri do not fit the categories of insurgencies established by Christopher Clapham (1998). The new insurgent groups, such as ISGS, tend to be local and global at the same time: they effectively appropriate the global discourse of Islamic Jihad, but remain rooted in local cleavages. This suggests that branding has become an ever more important arena of insurgency strategy. It is therefore important to distinguish between insurgencies that appropriate such discourses mainly for rhetorical branding purposes to establish an image of global significance and might, and those that aim to become operational units in a larger global armed struggle. Another important aspect of the new landscape of insurgencies is their ability to appropriate local grievances. By this, we mean their ability to exploit local cleavages such as disputes over land or trading rights to further their integration into local communities. AQIM has fine-tuned such strategies in the northern Mali periphery for decades (see Bøås 2015b), but the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has also clearly made use of such strategies (see Lia 2015). Other insurgents seem to rely more on loot and plunder in approaching local communities; Abubakar Shekau's *Boko Haram* represents an example of the latter.

This also suggests that the range of insurgencies in the Sahel is likely to have very different governing and governance capacities. Some are clearly able to provide a certain degree of order, whereas others are basically roaming groups without much territorial control (Olson 2000). Between these two poles, we find many insurgencies that provide

what can be called ‘sporadic governance’, that is, a type of governance that comes and goes. Such insurgencies do not attempt to gain more permanent territorial control, but rather social control of a targeted population through a combination of unpredictable coercive activities and the sporadic provision of some governance services. If the sovereign power is not able to prevent the coercive activities of an insurgency nor offer governance services of a higher quality than the insurgents, this may give the latter a considerable social grip over local populations. Against this backdrop, the question we explore here is how and to what degree ISGS and other insurgents operating in Tillabéri fit into this category.

This article is the product of the joint work of three researchers. One of us (Morten Bøås) lives and works in Norway, another (Abdoul Wakhab Cissé) is based in Senegal and the third (Laouali Mahamane) in Niamey, Niger. However, while based in different corners of the world, we have carried out most of the fieldwork together. The empirical basis for this article consists of focus group sessions and interviews with representatives of international and national organisations based in Niamey and farmers and herders that live in the Tillabéri region. The Niamey interviews were conducted in French, while the Tillabéri interviews were conducted in Fula and other local languages. A first round of fieldwork was carried out in November 2018, followed by a second one in November 2019. We were supposed to join forces again in late March 2020, when a workshop with community leaders and herder association members from northern Tillabéri was planned in Niamey. However, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, both internationally and within Niger (including a ban on motorbike circulation), the workshop had to be cancelled. Still, Mahamane managed to conduct parts of this data gathering through interviews in person and over the phone and WhatsApp. This most recent research material is used in this article, together with the material that we jointly collected in the previous two rounds.¹

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. First, we present the political economy of Tillabéri and the precarious situation for the pastoral herders. This is followed by an analysis of how the deteriorating security situation has left the inhabitants of Tillabéri between a rock and a hard place, suggesting that the region quickly became an enabling environment into which jihadi insurgents like ISGS could integrate locally. This takes us into an analysis of ISGS as an insurgency that is neither stationary nor roaming, but a hybrid movement that, while highly mobile, also exerts its influence on the local population through a combination of coercive instruments and some basic service provision. In this analysis, we also contrast the approach of ISGS with the heavy-handed response from the Nigerian security forces, before concluding with a discussion of how such situations force local populations into a constant negotiation of their livelihoods in a war without frontiers.

Tillabéri and its people

Tillabéri is ethnically diverse with a presence of many of the most important ethnic groups in Niger, including the Fulani, Songhay, Gourma, Hausa, Tuareg and Zarma. The main economic activities are agriculture, raising livestock and fishing, as well as some mining (Tillabéri Regional Development Plan 2016). However, for the Fulani and Tuareg

¹In this article, all citations from the interviews have been translated into English word-by-word. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, all interviewees have been anonymised.

groups of Tillabéri, pastoralism, namely the type of pastoralism that depends on seasonal migration of herds of cattle, the so-called transhumance, is – and has been for centuries – the primary economic activity. Transhumance is based on the movement of livestock and people between fixed seasonal pastures across internal and international borders. It is an activity of such economic and social magnitude that it is officially regulated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Transhumance (ECOWAS 1998). Given the international system of sovereign states, this type of international regulation is necessary, but will only work if both the relevant international organisation, in this case ECOWAS, and its member states have sufficient power and economic resources to enforce the Protocol and its regulatory mechanisms. This is no longer the case in many areas of the Sahel, as evident in Tillabéri, where our informants claim that the state does not have the capacity to organise and regulate the transhumance.²

Most pastoralists in Tillabéri, in particular those with large herds, depend on some form of transhumance during the long dry season (UNOWAS 2018). However, they claim that pasture is increasingly insufficient, especially during the dry season, forcing them to reduce their herds. This is the result of a combination of the expansion of agriculture supported by government policies, overgrazing and less rainfall during the rainy season. Pastoral marginalisation due to state-led agricultural policies and new land legislation is well known in African studies (Benjaminsen and Ba 2009) and increasingly recognised by international organisations as a key driver of local conflict (UNECA 2017). Our herder informants in Tillabéri claim that local state officials tend to privilege agricultural expansion over pastoralist needs.

The expansion of farming into traditional pastureland is not a new phenomenon in Tillabéri, as elsewhere in the Sahel. The process started in colonial times and accelerated as newly independent states tried to modernise agriculture and curb the nomadic lifestyle of pastoralists to increase control over them (see, for example, Bonfiglioli and Watson 1992). The pastoralist response to these challenges would traditionally have been to undertake even longer-distance transhumance. However, in such a precarious environment as Tillabéri, for most pastoralists, this is no longer an option, or has become one that includes a number of difficult and dangerous choices. As a herder explained to us in a town close to the Malian border:³

Currently, we can no longer go to areas where we used to pasture our animals – the conflict situation makes transhumance very difficult. We are facing two problems. On the one hand, the existence of bandits or jihadists – I do not know what to call them – who take *zakat* samples from our animals;⁴ on the other hand, there are the SDF operations which persecute us.⁵ These SDFs confuse any Fulani or Bella with a jihadist, they commit atrocities in our area.⁶

²Interviews with herders, herder associations' representatives and community leaders, Tillabéri, 29 April-6 May 2020.

³Interview with herder, Tillabéri towards Meneka in Mali, 29 April 2020.

⁴*Zakat* is an Islamic form of taxation that is supposedly collected for the benefit of the poor. Most Islamic insurgencies in the Sahel collect *zakat* in various forms, monetary as well as material, which is the case here. While these armed groups distribute some funds to poor people to gain their support, in most cases the *zakat* collected is used to provide for their fighters.

⁵SDF refers to the Nigerien security and defence forces.

⁶The term Bella is used here to refer to 'black' Tuareg pastoralists that live in Tillabéri. These people call themselves Daoussahak (or Idaksahak). They are a nomadic pastoralist group that lives between Meneka in Mali and Tillabéri in Niger. Historically, the Daoussahak are a dependent community in Tuareg society as they used to be the herdsmen of the noble Tuareg families. As they were traditionally of slave origin, they are darker-skinned than their 'masters'; and have been, and still are, commonly referred to as the Bella (the black Tuareg).

The challenges to their livelihood of the insecurity preventing the transhumance and the consequences, namely that pastoralists are forced to buy much more animal feed than they used to and at a much higher price (due to increased demand), were a constant grievance expressed in our interviews and focus group sessions with Tillabéri herders.⁷ Somehow, they have to raise money to buy animal feed, either by selling cattle or through other types of income-generating activities. The only alternative is to continue with the transhumance finding a way to navigate an increasingly violent landscape of jihadi insurgents, bandits and SDF battalions. This is not only costly, as they are likely to have to give away cattle in return for safe passage, but also dangerous because of the frequent (and sometimes lethal) armed robberies.

None of these choices are easy but, for most Fulani or Tuareg herders, giving up this way of life is not an option, either. Thus, people who live in Tillabéri find themselves between a rock and a hard place as their decisions will have consequences not only for herders themselves, but also for farmers and other locals.

Tillabéri between a rock and a hard place

The living conditions in Tillabéri have worsened dramatically as insecurity has surged since 2019, affecting both farmers and herders (FAO 2020; WFP 2020; OCHA 2019). To be sure, this has happened before in this region. Waves of inter-communal violence between farmers and herders over land disputes due to droughts already started in Tillabéri in 2008 (ICRC 2011; Assanvo *et al.* 2019), creating a climate of fear that hindered both farming and herding. The result was both a loss of livestock and food insecurity due to reduced farm production. As a consequence, in 2011, the International Committee of the Red Cross provided over 27,000 farmers and herders with three months of food rations and special seeds, allowing for a rapid harvest (ICRC 2011). While the first waves of inter-communal violence that had erupted in 2008 eventually died down, the proliferation of light weapons in the region after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and the trouble in Mali that emerged in 2012 further exacerbated the situation (Bøås and Torheim 2013). This led to new clashes, with Fulani and Tuareg pastoralist communities on both sides of the Mali-Niger border directly affected by the jihadist insurgencies that were gaining ground on the Malian side.

What this shows is that the spill-over effects of farmer-herder conflicts in the context of a state that lacks both the institutional strength and the sovereign power to effectively regulate farmer-herder relations are clearly an important factor. However, farmer-herder conflicts do not emerge by themselves. There are underlying causes – in this case, droughts that reduced the area of land available for both farming and grazing (ICRC 2011; FAO 2020; Vellturo 2020; WFP 2020). But there are also the spill-over effects of the conflict that erupted in Mali in 2012. While the Nigerien government tried to handle them, the state's command and control mechanisms over troops in the field were too weak (see ICG 2020).

However, this by itself is not sufficient to explain why what initially was a weak and small band of insurgents managed so quickly to get such a hold on a population that lives only 130 kilometres from the capital city. Did the government in Niamey fail to comprehend the threat that these insurgents represented or is the answer to this question to be found in the

⁷Interviews with herders, Tillabéri, 19 April-6 May 2020.

strategies used by the insurgents towards the local population and the failure of the state to oppose this? In our view, the conditions present in Tillabéri when the current wave of violence started are best characterised as an ‘enabling environment’, ripe for violent entrepreneurs to exploit.

Tillabéri – an enabling environment?

We define an ‘enabling environment’ as an area where the combination of economic recession, rising unemployment and low and declining levels of education suggests that some disadvantaged communities or individuals have become so alienated from the state and local society that they can be inclined to support, join or implement organised violence inspired by political or religious extremist ideology. If and when this happens, the structural factors that constitute the ‘enabling environment’ translate into an array of deep-seated grievances that provide the harbingers of such ideologies with emotional entry points, allowing them to garner support (Rupesinghe and Bøås 2019). For example, this can happen when an armed group targets those who are – or feel – most vulnerable in a society; offering them a means of escaping a situation of despair and lack of direction in favour of the dead certainty of violent resistance (Bøås and Dunn 2013). The strategy is to recruit among the poorest and least educated communities, targeting destitute young men who are considered to be more malleable to indoctrination and may perceive that they have little, if anything, to lose by joining in on the violence.

The living conditions in Tillabéri have always been precarious but, since 2008, life has been particularly difficult. Herd sizes are shrinking while the area is experiencing rapid population growth – the fertility rate is 7.6 children per woman and the average household size is eight persons (Tillabéri Regional Development Plan 2016). The Tillabéri region has significant natural resource potential for development. It is still Niger’s main centre for cattle-breeding, and it contains the country’s most important water resources. The Niger River (450 km in the region) and its seven tributaries (Gorouol, Dargol, Sirba, Gouroubi, Diamongou, Tapoa and Mékrou) are important reservoirs for irrigation and water for cattle (Tillabéri Regional Development Plan 2016). However, the full potential is far from realised, and repeated droughts and the failure to build up drought and climate change resilience mean that local communities are suffering dramatic declines in food security due to smaller herd sizes and drops in agricultural production (FAO 2020; WFP 2020; OCHA 2019).

The government response to this negative development could have been more effective, but it has to be stressed that it is almost impossible to initiate large-scale projects to increase climate change resilience among farmers and herders in an environment of unpredictable violence. The sad fact is that this becomes a vicious cycle not easily broken as increased food insecurity leads to more violence, which in turn makes it even more difficult to implement countermeasures to food insecurity.

Tillabéri also has mining potential as minable deposits of gold, coal, iron and phosphate have been discovered. However, they have not been exploited so far, and the current security situation does not allow for anything other than small-scale and occasional alluvial mining.

Our point is that Tillabéri has development potential based on a centuries-old tradition of cattle-breeding that, if supported by more efficient water and irrigation systems,

could bring about more resilient food and income security. However, the development of the rural sector is confronted with a range of barriers, including climatic variability, animal diseases and the predominance of traditional systems of food production. Furthermore, market supply networks are disorganised and difficult to access due to inadequate and degraded road infrastructure and insufficient investment in farming and pastoralism (Tillabéri Regional Development Plan 2016; OCHA 2019; WFP 2020). The result is that food and animal feed deficits have become chronic and even structural in parts of Tillabéri (especially the north). Likewise, if the security situation had allowed for it to be systematically organised as an industry, mining could have given the region not only much-needed employment opportunities, but even an economic boom. However, as long as the existing, but untapped economic potential is not utilised in an efficient, transparent and legitimate manner, Tillabéri will continue to be marked by a continuous deterioration of the productive base, high population growth and further insecurity that will constitute an even greater threat to its economic and social foundations.⁸

This is certainly a serious development challenge, but the same description could be applied to other regions of Niger as well (see also Vellturro 2020). This suggests that, while these factors contribute to making Tillabéri an enabling environment, there are additional factors that set the process in motion there. First, as we have shown, there is a history of farmer-herder conflicts in the region. The facts that herds are larger than elsewhere in the country and agriculture has expanded due to population pressure combined with disputed access to water (e.g. the Niger River and its tributaries) underlie the history of inter-communal violence in the region. Second, while these conflicts have historically waxed and waned, spill-over effects from the conflict in Mali have increased their intensity. Third, what has really ignited the violence that has swept through Tillabéri since 2019, is the increased ability of ISGS insurgents to integrate into local communities by appropriating local grievances and inter-communal conflict through a combination of coercive activities and the offer of basic services, such as protection and the establishment of some mobile Islamic courts. This process did not emerge out of the blue, but had been in the making since January 2013, when the French military Operation Serval started to drive jihadist insurgents out of towns in Northern Mali, as in the case of Gao. One of those who had to flee Gao was the current ISGS emir, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui (ICG 2020).

The rise of ISGS

When the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) rebellion gained ground in Mali in 2012, it armed young Tuareg and Daoussahak fighters and took control of the Gao region. In the chaos that followed, with plunder and cattle theft directed against Fulani communities (Bøås and Torheim 2013), some young Fulani herders started to look elsewhere for allies. As the Malian state could not provide them with security, they found support in a jihadi insurgency that operated in the same area: the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) (Benjaminsen and Ba 2019).

⁸The data used in this section is collected from the Tillabéri Regional Development Plan 2016-2020, fieldnotes from November 2018 and 2019, and interviews with herders, herder associations' representatives and community leaders conducted between 29 April and 6 May 2020.

MUJAO had undoubtedly gained some local support in and around Gao, and it cunningly appropriated local grievances concerning land rights, taking the side of Fulani pastoralist groups in a local land rights conflict (Bøås 2015b). In this process, MUJAO also welcomed and gained the support of Fulani fighters from northern Tillabéri. These were a useful group for MUJAO as many of them already had experience with the use of force due to the years of inter-communal conflict in Tillabéri.

When this process started, al-Sahraoui was a MUJAO commander and, when the insurgency gained control of Gao, he became the MUJAO governor of Gao city. This would not last for long as Operation Serval closed in on the city in January 2013. Al-Sahraoui had to flee the city, and his escape was assisted by his newfound allies among Fulani fighters from the Mali-Niger border area, including some from Tillabéri (ICG 2020). Here, along the Malian border to Tillabéri, al-Sahraoui found a new enabling environment in which he could embed himself and the fighters that had travelled with him through the appropriation of local grievances and along lines of inter-communal conflict.

In this initial period, the Malian army was not present in the border area and Operation Serval did not have the capacity to guard it, while Nigerien security forces, although present, lacked the capacity, training and leadership to comprehend and deal with what was happening (see ICG 2020). The result was that al-Sahraoui and the fighters that had followed him could regroup and start recruiting locally in Tillabéri, especially among those Fulani herder communities that for a long time had felt that their land was being encroached upon by agricultural expansion in the south and increased competition from Daoussahak pastoralist communities in the north. Thus, in a political vacuum in which the state was not completely absent, but lacked control on the use of force, al-Sahraoui managed to gain not territorial control, but such a tight grip on certain population groups that he could establish his own insurgency, ISGS, pledging allegiance to IS and al-Baghdadi in 2015.⁹ This was a challenge to state security for which the Nigerien government was not well prepared.

A heavy-handed response – and its consequences

The response from the Nigerien government broadly consisted of three different successive approaches: first, a military campaign from early 2017 to about June 2018; second, an attempt to reach out to local Fulani communities to bring them back into the fold of the state and drive a wedge between them and al-Sahraoui and his ISGS insurgents; and finally, back to a hard security approach when the new round of fighting started in 2019.

The impact of the military campaign

When the Nigerien government realised that al-Sahraoui and ISGS had started to get a foothold in Tillabéri, it first attempted a military operation to uproot the jihadi insurgents. This campaign started in early 2017 and lasted until approximately June 2018 (see ICG

⁹ISGS is in fact a separate group from the breakaway faction of *Boko Haram* that has taken the name Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Their origin is completely different, and they operate in separate territories: ISGS mainly in the border areas between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger; ISWAP mainly in Nigeria and, to a lesser extent, in Niger's Diffa region that borders Lake Chad and northern Nigeria, see also Berlingozzi and Stoddard (2020).

2020). In this period, the Nigerien military campaign was supported by Malian militias allied with the Malian state and the French Operation Barkhane. The Malian militias included the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), which consists mainly of young Daoussahak fighters, and the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (GATIA), both part of a coalition of Malian armed groups known as the *Plateforme*. These groups are remnants of the 2012 Tuareg rebellion led by MNLA, which in 2015, during the Algiers peace process, signed a deal with the government in Bamako. The Agreement of the Algiers process has never been fully implemented and, even if it had been, it would not by itself have brought peace to Mali and the Sahel, as none of the jihadi-inspired insurgencies (militarily the strongest) was present at the negotiating table.¹⁰

Nevertheless, while the Algiers process for all practical purposes is a failure with regard to bringing peace to Mali, groups like GATIA and MSA have stuck to the Agreement and have become not only the hired hands of the government in Bamako, but also useful allies on the ground for Operation Barkhane. In return, these groups receive money and weapons, but also the opportunity to engage in a number of income-generating activities such as cattle theft and smuggling. The level of impunity in Mali is high for groups that can portray themselves as useful auxiliaries for a government primarily concerned with regime security (Bamako) and a French intervention force that needs tactical allies on the ground. In this case, GATIA and MSA operated mainly in Mali's Ménaka region, but were also at times allowed by the Nigerien army to cross the border to northern Tillabéri, as was for example the case during the 2017-18 campaign.

This had consequences on the ground as the Malian militias not only pursued suspected jihadists, but also raided cattle from local Fulani communities in Tillabéri. As these communities saw it, this happened if not exactly with the blessing of the Nigerien armed forces, certainly because they chose to turn a blind eye to the looting conducted by the Malian militias. The only source of protection they could turn to was al-Sahraoui and his men. This is yet another example of how a heavy-handed and ill thought-through state response prepares the path for the integration into local communities by jihadi insurgents. As a Fulani activist explained to us:¹¹

Jihadists are not based in the villages or communities. They have their own small bases in the bush, where food and weapons are stored. They are extremely mobile, and hundreds of fighters can gather in a couple of hours: they communicate skilfully, like in Vietnam, they are everywhere and nowhere. Local people often protect them, because jihadists are seen as having contributed to the stability of the community against the Tuareg raids: we fight for our right to stay; if MNLA had won, we would all have had to abandon our places.

Thus, not only did al-Sahraoui find sanctuary in the Mali-Niger border area after he had to flee from Gao, but he and his fighters also quickly managed to achieve a certain level of local integration. Not in the form of complete territorial control, but enough to get a tighter grip on the local Fulani population than Nigerien state security forces.

What al-Sahraoui and ISGS have to offer is a very rudimentary form of governance – a sporadic governance that is mobile and that comes and goes, and as such is haphazard

¹⁰They were not invited and would most likely have refused to take part if they had been. The problem for both sides would have been what to talk about given that one side, namely the jihadi insurgents, basically renounce both the Malian nation state and the international state system (see also Bøås and Dunn 2017).

¹¹Interview with Fulani activist, Niamey, 3 November 2019.

and unpredictable – but still seen by local communities as more reliable and enforceable than the one the Nigerien state has to offer. What this suggests is not only that an insurgency like ISGS is neither stationary nor completely roaming, as in the dichotomy proposed by Mancur Olson (2000), but also that ISGS is quite deliberately using a hybrid strategy that combines the two different positions that a non-state armed movement can take. For ISGS, its semi-permanent presence in local communities is a source of respect and support as well as fear, while at the same time avoiding the costly matter of controlling and attempting to hold territory.

The success of this strategy is also much due to the indiscriminate approach of the Nigerien security and defence forces, which has pushed several young herders (not only Fulani) to support and even join ISGS. It is therefore hardly a surprise that Niger's military campaign achieved little against the insurgents. In addition, the violence that the Nigerien army unleashed pushed the local population further away from the state. As a herder in the Tillabéri municipality of Banibangou complained:¹²

They [the army] do not play their role of protecting populations, we are sometimes more afraid of the SDF than of bandits or jihadists. The SDF can, based on a false testimony or unverified information, kill us or kill our children or send them to high-security prisons in Quallam or Niamey. The SDF mission, in principle, is to protect the population, but it is the opposite: on 5 February 2020, an SDF mission went to my camp and killed two of my children, I was forced to flee.

A failed dialogue¹³

This takes us to the second phase of the Nigerien government's attempt to handle the security situation that had emerged in Tillabéri. There is little doubt that the failure of the Nigerien counter-insurgency strategy helped al-Sahraoui and his men gain some legitimacy, support structures and new recruits locally. Some circles among the political elite in Niamey realised this and, having second thoughts about its counter-insurgency strategy, the Nigerien government initiated a process of dialogue. This started during the summer of 2018 and lasted until the end of the year.

As a result, ISGS was pushed back for a while, but the dialogue process came to nothing. While the willingness and trust of local Fulani communities to enter the process can be questioned, the main problem was the lack of state capacity to see the process through. The dialogue was led by the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP).¹⁴ It is attached to the Presidency of the Republic and is in charge of prospective analysis, prevention and management of crises and conflicts in all regions of Niger. In the case of Tillabéri, the HACP approach was to launch a disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation (DDR) programme by working with local community leaders. They were supposed to convince local rank-and-file jihadi insurgents to surrender in exchange for immunity and possibly new jobs in the security and defence forces. These positions were also supposed to be available to young men from local communities along the border,

¹²Interview with herder in the Tillabéri municipality of Banibangou, 2 May 2020.

¹³This section is based on information that the authors obtained from conversations with HACP representatives and civil society activists in Niamey in November 2018.

¹⁴The HACP was first initiated in 1995 as the Office of the High Commissioner for the Restoration of Peace to monitor the implementation of the Peace Accords with the former Tuareg rebellion (the Nigerien Movement for Justice) in northern Niger, and transformed into the HACP in 2011.

particularly from Fulani villages. The idea may have been good, but the HACP was not able to see it through. Few insurgents actually joined, and even fewer young Fulani men. Some did surrender, but the overall figure was low.¹⁵ The process of recruitment into the security and defence forces was seen as opaque and some locals complained that even young Fulani men who wanted to join were discarded by the army. People simply did not trust the army to defend them against the jihadists who would clearly see this as treason and inflict punishment not only on those who joined or surrendered, but also on their communities. Finally, since the organisation was led by a Tuareg general close to President Mahamadou Issoufou, local Fulani communities tended to see him as a possible ally or friend of the Tuareg and Daoussahak militias that previously had attacked their communities along the border with Mali.

Negotiating livelihoods during a war without frontiers

As the dialogue was running on empty in Tillabéri, al-Sahraoui and ISGS managed to show local communities that they had more than violence to offer. The insurgents killed people they saw as collaborating with the government, but by and large avoided larger killings of civilians. More importantly, they started to offer some rudimentary basic services: at times they helped retrieve stolen cattle and established some local courts to rule over land disputes and other issues that matter to local communities. Just as we have learned from studies of similar processes in Central Mali (Rupesinghe and Bøås 2019), these courts quickly gained a reputation for honesty and competency. This is not to say that they are good, but rather that they are seen as more efficient and less corrupt than official state courts. ISGS is therefore more than just another user of force, it also has an agenda of governance and order. However, this agenda is weak, as the governance it has on offer is sporadic and haphazard; it comes and goes with an armed movement that is hyper-mobile but has enough local presence to gain a considerable social grip on certain local populations.

The violence that has been unleashed in Tillabéri since 2019 is quite different from the use of force characteristic of conventional warfare. What is taking place here is a war without frontiers in which all sides are highly mobile, moving in and out of local communities. ISGS, bandits, militias allied with the Malian government, Nigerien security and defence forces, G5 Sahel forces, Operation Barkhane forces: everybody is on the move, trying to gain control over local populations with the means they have at hand. Caught between all these movements are local populations that also depend on mobility for their livelihood. This is how a herder explained it to us:¹⁶

There are young people riding motorcycles in the area, it's not been long before the G5 Sahel came to our village, they took more than 20 motorcycles and burned these motorcycles, and a few days later, bandits came to threaten people. The bandits were young people from all ethnicities (Fulani, Tuareg, Mossi, Songhay). They spent three days in our village. We do not sleep because they track us, and the authorities and the SDF think that we are colluding with them; we are caught between two fires.

¹⁵This is based on conversations with HACP representatives and civil society activists in Niamey in November 2018. The question of the DDR programme in Tillabéri is a sensitive one, and HACP was not willing (or able) to provide any figures. The authors of this article are currently engaged in discussing some activities with HACP that could allow access both to quantitative data as well as former ISGS fighters who have participated in the programme.

¹⁶Interview with herder, Bankilaré, Tillabéri, 4 May 2020.

For local populations, the question is whom you can trust for what; who is most likely to provide something needed for survival given the state of precarity in which people live. For some, the answer is ISGS, but clearly not for all. Local people complain about the strict religious practices the jihadi insurgents attempt to enforce. Weddings are no longer the celebrations they used to be, music is forbidden, and women have much less freedom than before. For some, however, this is just another price that has to be paid to whoever can guarantee some level of protection for their pastoral livelihood. The question is, how do people live with the violence? A pastoralist leader, after a lengthy description of the events that led to the current situation, the various armed actors involved and their relationship to Fulani and Tuareg communities, ended laconically:¹⁷

People just keep a low profile. They accept all the conditions of these groups: non-state armed groups that impose *zakat* and punish those accused of collaborating with the SDF, while the SDF instead of looking for and finding the bandits attack the herders.

As long as this situation continues, the social fabric of these societies will continue to fray, and even more young people will search for the authority of the gun as it is becoming one of the most effective ways to negotiate a livelihood. Those who cannot or will not, have to continue to endure life in an environment enabling violent extremism where pragmatic silence and the willingness to accept the order or unorder of the user of force with the most predictable presence in one's daily life becomes the best bet for survival.

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that the rise of support for jihadism among some Fulani communities in Tillabéri is conditional. The armed challenge to the Nigerien state does not originate from an 'ungoverned space' of disorder, but rather from the violent rejection of a dysfunctional mode of state governance that is remote, weak and often coercive. The other side of this coin is the 'governance that comes and goes' of ISGS. This may be sporadic but is seen by some local Fulani as an alternative form of order, more legitimate, less costly, more efficient and not corrupt.

All of this adds up to a landscape of violence where the spill-over effects from the conflict in Mali clearly have played a role. The history of farmer-herder and herder-herder conflicts, such as those between Tuareg and Fulani communities, also matters. However, what really has set Tillabéri on fire is the combination of the failure of the Nigerien state to manage these conflicts – and the related, indiscriminate violence of its security and defence forces and their allies (the Malian militias) – on the one hand, and the ability of the jihadi insurgents to exploit the situation to achieve a level of local integration through the appropriation of local conflict lines and grievances, on the other. As seen elsewhere in the Sahel, this is not the first time that heavy-handed state response strategies have been the primary cause of recruitment to violent extremism – and, unfortunately, will most likely not be the last. Until a more permanent order comes into being, the inhabitants of Tillabéri will just have to continue to adjust to negotiating livelihoods in a war without frontiers.

¹⁷Interview with herder community leader, Bankilaré, Tillabéri, 6 May 2020.

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