

Policy Brief 31 DEC 2024

## Dialogue with Jihadists in Niger: Potentials, Limits, Failure

*Lisa Tschörner*

**Jihadist violence has proliferated in the Sahel region over the past decade. As well as conducting military counter-terrorism operations, Niger's civilian government under President Mohamed Bazoum (2021–2023) also sought dialogue with jihadists. A significant decline in deadly attacks from the beginning of 2022 raised hopes that the dual strategy was working. Instead, however, the July 2023 coup and the subsequent deterioration of the security situation have highlighted the fragility of the negotiated arrangements. Rather than addressing structural causes of conflict, the approach was primarily aimed at repentance and behavioural change. The fragmentation and commercialisation of initiatives and a lack of coordination between civil and military measures hindered the promotion of sustainable peace. In order to achieve long-term success through dialogue, it is necessary to recognise jihadist groups as political actors and work towards the negotiation of consensual compromises.**

In his first public speech, Nigerien coup leader Abdourahamane Tiani cited the civilian government's incoherent and inefficient handling of the country's security crisis as the main reason for the military take-over. Speaking on 29 July 2023, three days after the army seized power, Tiani accused the deposed President Mohamed Bazoum of illegally releasing terrorist leaders and bandits. This charge had been voiced frequently by critics of the government ever since Bazoum's February 2022 announcement that he had entered into dialogue with jihadist groups. At a leadership conference in Niamey on 25 February 2022, Bazoum announced that he had sent emissaries to "terrorist" leaders, released prisoners and received them for talks at the presidential palace.<sup>1</sup> Bazoum's statements were met with outrage by the Nigerien public. He was accused of weakening the morale of the army in the fight against terrorism and undermining the principles of the rule of law. Parts of the opposition even alleged that the dialogue initiatives represented an acknowledgement that the government had been defeated by the jihadist groups.

However, Bazoum's approach to dialogue, which became known as the "policy of the outstretched hand", was conceived as a complement – not an alternative – to military intervention. It officially comprised three components: (1) talks with Nigerien leaders and members of jihadist groups, seeking to persuade them to give up the armed struggle; (2) an exit programme to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate former fighters; and (3) local mediation and

<sup>1</sup> "Conférence des cadres 2022 de M Bazoum Président du Niger", 25 February 2022, accessed 7 August 2024.

reconciliation initiatives to resolve local conflicts exploited by jihadist groups to mobilise support.

According to representatives of the Bazoum government, Niger's successful handling of the Tuareg rebellions in the 1990s served as a model for the "policy of the outstretched hand". In that case a combination of military pressure, internationally supported mediation initiatives at all levels from leadership to community, and government promises to integrate the rebels politically, militarily and economically paved the way for peace negotiations.<sup>2</sup>

However, the extent to which the political process with the Tuareg rebels actually represents an example of successful pacification and integration of rebel forces is contested. It is true that the strategic placement of former rebel leaders in politically important positions, coupled with development programmes, gave the government in Niamey a certain degree of control over the possibility of the insurgency reigniting. Peace consolidation elements such as the disarmament of former Tuareg fighters or their integration into the formal economy were only partially implemented, however. Another concern is that the "policy of the outstretched hand", unlike the strategy for dealing with the Tuareg rebellions, did not seek to integrate the jihadists politically.

Despite this, a downward trend in jihadist attacks in Niger gave reason to hope that a combination of military and civilian measures could overcome the security crisis provoked by local offshoots of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. While the security situation had deteriorated rapidly between 2018 and 2021, particularly in the Tillabéri region bordering Mali and Burkina Faso, the figures improved from 2022 until the military took power in July 2023.<sup>3</sup> The number of civilians killed in North Tillabéri declined by almost 80 per cent between 2021 and 2022,<sup>4</sup> while the number of members of the security forces killed in the region also fell from an average of one hundred in 2019, 2020 and 2021 to just eight in 2022.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the "policy of the outstretched hand" remained a balancing act. It had become increasingly controversial domestically, allowing the coup leaders to instrumentalise it to legitimise their seizure of power. As the following analysis shows, it ultimately failed to achieve its goal of promoting sustainable peace. Instead of recognising jihadist groups as political actors and negotiating compromises, the approach centred on repentance and behavioural change. Moreover, the various dialogue, mediation and reconciliation initiatives remained uncoordinated, geographically restricted and limited in duration – and are even said to have enabled jihadist groups to consolidate their grip on power in the regional context.

Niger's "policy of the outstretched hand" illustrates a dilemma faced by national and international decision-makers dealing with jihadist violence. On the one hand, analysts are increasingly calling for dialogue and negotiations with jihadist groups,<sup>6</sup> and with good reason: after all, more than a decade of internationally supported military interventions and stabilisation efforts have failed to contain jihadist violence in the Sahel. Furthermore, long-

<sup>2</sup> Yvan Guichaoua and Mathieu Pellerin, "Making Peace, Building the State: Relations between Central Government and the Sahelian Peripheries in Niger and Mali", *Étude de l'Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire*, issue 51, March 2018, accessed 7 August 2024.

<sup>3</sup> ACLED, "Fact Sheet: Military Coup in Niger", 3 August 2023, accessed 12 August 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Rae Armstrong, *Comprendre l'accalmie: une reprise en main du Nord-Tillabéri au Niger* (Bamako: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), 2023).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Alex Thurston, "Peace talks with Sahelian jihadists? It's worth a shot", *The New Humanitarian*, 3 August 2022, accessed 7 August 2024; Luis Martinez, *L'Afrique, le prochain califat? La spectaculaire expansion du djihadisme* (Tallandier, 2023), 200.

term studies confirm that organisations classified as “terrorist” are more likely to end their armed struggle through formal political inclusion than through military defeat.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the jihadist forces active in the Sahel are actors seeking power and domination. By affiliating themselves with the terrorist networks of al-Qaeda and Islamic State they have committed themselves to a Salafist-jihadist ideology centred on theological exclusivity and rejection of the international state system. There are legitimate concerns that a negotiated solution to the conflict would involve compromising liberal values such as the principle of secularism or respect for democracy and human rights.<sup>8</sup>

However, it should be borne in mind that the jihadist groups active in the Sahel are not static entities, but constantly changing social formations. They are historically embedded in local conflict contexts, and must continuously renegotiate their relationships – both internally and with state authorities, other violent actors and the population.<sup>9</sup> Violence and religion play a central role in this, but other factors are also at play. In their search for legitimacy, their everyday actions are characterised by a mix of competition and cooperation. Understanding these dynamics is an important prerequisite for successful dialogue with the leaders, and potentially with the different factions of the organisations. Under certain circumstances targeted military pressure can create the conditions for violent actors to engage in dialogue. However, it is much more important to recognise and address the causes of conflict. Only if political elites and populations in the areas affected by violence are willing to recognise jihadist groups as political actors and address local grievances can dialogue lead to the identification of broadly supported compromises.

As the following analysis shows, those conditions did not exist in Niger and the “policy of the outstretched hand” remained controversial, contributing to the delegitimisation and destabilisation of the civilian government, and thus to the success of the military coup. The resurgence of violence in the months following the military take-over demonstrates that the jihadist groups in Niger have neither lost influence nor given up their armed struggle.

## Repentance and Behavioural Change

Both the political discourse and the practice of the “policy of the outstretched hand” relied primarily on repentance and behavioural change rather than recognising jihadist groups as political actors and naming and addressing structural causes of conflict.

From early 2022 President Bazoum travelled repeatedly to parts of the country affected by jihadist violence in order to signal the presence of the state and persuade violent actors to demobilise.

In public speeches and interviews, Bazoum and other government representatives said they intended to use dialogue to bring Niger’s “children” or “youth” back from the clutches of the “terrorists” and give them a second chance. In this context, interviewees spoke of “resocialisation”, “reconditioning” or even “healing” of “repentants”.

<sup>7</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton University Press, 2009); Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda* (Rand Corporation, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Thurston, “Illiberalism and post-conflict settlements with jihadists: a Malian case study”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 43, no.10 (2022), 2396–2412.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Tschörner: Jihadism as a Driver of Local Conflicts: Examining Non-State Violent Orders in Tillabéri, Niger (Berlin: Megatrends Afrika, 2023), 06, accessed Aug 7 2024; Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2nd ed.

The paternalistic framing signalled strength. It underlined the government's official position that the "policy of the outstretched hand" was merely about talks towards the voluntary surrender of individual Nigerien members of jihadist groups and not about negotiations with foreign leaders – which would have implied political concessions. Even though there were certainly efforts behind the scenes to arrange negotiations, the distinction between "our children" (not real jihadists) and real foreign "terrorists" played down the political motivations and influence of Nigerien members of the violent groups. Endogenous, structural reasons for successful mobilisation by jihadist organisations in Niger – such as decades-old unresolved local conflicts, experiences of discrimination and inadequate provision of security by the state – remained unmentioned, as did Niamey's political responsibility.

To facilitate repentance and behavioural change of Nigerien members of jihadist groups, the government employed amnesties. The legal and institutional framework was created during the presidency of Mahamadou Issoufou (2011 to 2021). In line with the regional stabilisation strategy developed by the Lake Chad Basin Commission and supported by the African Union, the government adopted amendments to the penal code on 2 November 2018. These stipulated that ex-combatants from the terrorist organisation Boko Haram should be exempted from criminal prosecution, provided that they had not participated directly in the planning and organisation of attacks.<sup>10</sup> It turned out to be difficult to prove this in practice, especially where combatants were apprehended during military counter-terrorism operations. A government reception centre for former members of Boko Haram in Goudoumaria, in the eastern Diffa region, has been operating with international support since 2016. An initial cohort of 243 ex-combatants, including thirty women, spent over two years there, partly due to the unclear legal situation. The fear of being held indefinitely with no prospect of a better life led to frustration and escape attempts.<sup>11</sup> The arrangements for a second reception centre for members of the terrorist organisations "Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin" (JNIM) and 'Islamic State Sahel Province' (ISSP, ISGS until March 2022), which opened in Hamdallaye in the Tillabéri region in May 2022, therefore stipulated that the "repentants" should not be held for longer than three months. However, the centre was not properly operational until the military coup in July 2023.

To reintegrate the ex-combatants into society, the government relied on a programme of "deradicalisation". Conceptually, the "deradicalisation" approach remained vague. In its practical implementation, it envisaged the transformation of individual members of jihadist groups into good citizens by converting those willing to leave to a state-approved, moderate understanding of Islam and teaching them vocational skills.<sup>12</sup>

In 2021 the exit programme became part of a national strategy for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants,<sup>13</sup> which replicates the dichotomous framing differentiating between Nigerien youth and foreign terrorists: the crises in neighbouring Libya, Nigeria and Mali are cited as the cause of the rise in jihadist violence. The weakness of the Malian state and its failure to ensure justice and security are particularly

<sup>10</sup> Commission du Bassin du Lac Tchad, Commission de l'Union Africaine, *Stratégie Régionale de stabilisation, de redressement et de résilience des zones du bassin du lac Tchad affectées par la crise Boko Haram*, August 2018, accessed 7 August 2024; "Niger: un projet de loi pour réinsérer les repentis de Boko Haram", *rfi*, 6 November 2018, accessed 7 August 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Jeannine Ella Abatan and Remadji Hoinathy, "Réussir Goudoumaria: les ex-associés de Boko Haram se réintègrent-ils?" *Institute for Security Studies*, 8 December 2021, accessed 7 August 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Abdoulaye Sounaye, "Governing Muslim Subjects in the Sahel: Deradicalisation and a State-Led Islamic Reform in West Africa", in *Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds: Religion and Society in the Context of the Global*, ed. Jeanine Elif Dağyeli, Claudia Ghrawi and Ulrike Freitag (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), accessed 9 August 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Ministère de l'Intérieur et de la Décentralisation, *Programme National de Prise en Charge de la Reddition (PNPCR)*, May 2021.

emphasised. However, the document fails to recognise the existence of similar problems in Niger, which have contributed to unrest in certain sections of the population and their support for jihadist groups. A decades-old dispute between farmers and cattle herders that has contributed to the Islamic State's mobilisation successes in Niger is mentioned – but trivialised as a “banal rural conflict”.

The extent to which religious re-education and vocational integration can actually convert members of jihadist groups remains questionable. Firstly, the approach suggests that the combatants are a homogenous group of radicalised individuals. Yet, empirical studies show the complexity of the motives for individual and collective affiliation with jihadist organisations in the Sahel as well as the diversity of the socio-economic backgrounds of combatants.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, in practice social reintegration remained primarily the responsibility of the ex-combatants themselves, with structural constraints such as poverty and chronic insecurity limiting the individual's agency, especially in rural areas.

For example, local observers pointed out that close social ties between the population and jihadist groups made it difficult to leave – even for those willing to do so. Combatants' relatives often continued to live in the villages controlled by jihadist groups, making them potential targets of retribution.

Participants in the demobilisation programme also complained that the vocations they learned were not aligned with the local labour markets, which had been affected by the security crisis.<sup>15</sup> The reintegration bonus of 50,000 CFA francs (around 75 euros) was also considered too low. Female ex-combatants also said that they had not benefited from the measures to the same extent as male participants, as they were only considered as the wives or daughters of fighters.

As a consequence, the results of the implemented reintegration measures were sobering. Most of the first cohort of ex-combatants in Goudoumaria were unable to make a living from their newly learnt skills. One interviewee from the Ministry of the Interior reported that 45 per cent of the ex-combatants in the first cohort had sold the equipment they had received for reintegration and a further 15 per cent had rented it out temporarily. To counteract this development, entrepreneurial skills had been included in the teaching curriculum, he said.

## Fragmentation and Commercialisation of Dialogue and Mediation Initiatives

In addition to institutionalisation of the exit and deradicalisation programme, the “policy of the outstretched hand” also included direct negotiations with the leadership of jihadist groups and mediation and reconciliation initiatives for parts of their social base. However, a lack of consensus within the government and the involvement of many local, national and international actors with different, sometimes contradictory interests and objectives prevented effective coordinated action right through until the military coup in July 2023.

Already in 2016 Bazoum – then interior minister – sought dialogue with the then leader of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, following a wave of terrorist attacks in the northern Tillabéri region, which borders Mali and Burkina

<sup>14</sup> Harouna Ousemane Ibrahim, “Enjeux Sécuritaires et mobilisation des jeunes dans les groupes extrémistes violents. Une Analyse par l'exemple d'Abala (Niger)”, (Doctoral thesis, Abdou Moumouni University Niamey, 2023) ; Vincent Foucher, “The Tale of a Disappearing Lake”. The Boko Haram Insurgency and the Narrative Politics of the Climate Crisis”, *Megatrends Spotlight* 23, 6 March 2023, accessed 9 August 2024; Tschörner, “Jihadism as a Driver of Local Conflicts: Examining Non-State Violent Orders in Tillabéri, Niger”.

<sup>15</sup> Abatan and Hoinathy, “Réussir Goudoumaria”.

Faso. In an interview with the British *Guardian*, Bazoum said that he had agreed to al-Sahrawi's demands regarding the release of prisoners. In return, al-Sahrawi had promised to direct his jihad against Mali and to spare Niger from further attacks.<sup>16</sup> However, hardliners in the military and government opposed continuation of the dialogue. The channel of communication broke down and the violence escalated. Bazoum himself now stated that Niger saw no other solution than to weaken jihadist groups by military means.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, Bazoum continued to seek dialogue with leading violent actors in the following years, focusing primarily on depriving jihadist groups of their members and their social base.

Bazoum turned to representatives of the Peul ethnic group in the Tillabéri region, some of whom had previously joined the forces of ISGS leader al-Sahrawi. In September 2017, this resulted in an official dialogue forum under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior, with the aim of strengthening trust between the state and the Peul communities in North Tillabéri and persuading Nigerien ISGS combatants to give up their fight.

However, conflicts over strategic and policy dimensions dogged the initiative from the very beginning. National and international players increasingly competed for political influence, making a coordinated approach more difficult.

In 2018, for example, the dialogue forum was expanded on the advice of an international NGO, which was included in the process by the Ministry of the Interior. Talks were no longer to be held only with the Peul communities in North Tillabéri; other ethnic groups were also to take part. In addition, the High Authority for Peace Consolidation (HACP),<sup>18</sup> which was founded in 1995 as an institutional guarantor for implementation of the peace agreements with the Tuareg rebels and is answerable to the Ministry of the Interior, was to play a coordinating role. Although the initiative thus acquired a more inclusive character, it failed to fulfil its original goal of addressing the specific political grievances of the Peul communities. Their representatives felt increasingly patronised and lost confidence in the initiative. Rather than parties to a conflict and therefore potential participants in a mediation process, they saw themselves as victims of political discrimination and violence, for which they sought recognition and compensation. They also accused the Tuareg-led HACP of lacking neutrality in relation to a decades-old conflict between Peul and Tuareg groups that had contributed to the ISGS mobilisation in the Tillabéri region. Additionally, they criticised the international NGO for having prevented direct talks with members of the terrorist organisation on the grounds that this violated the principles of the NGO and its donors. Growing differences between the participants ultimately led to a split in the dialogue forum and an uncoordinated proliferation of local, national and internationally driven dialogue and mediation initiatives.

Even though promising results were achieved at the local level with the signing of several peace agreements (e.g., Abala, 28 August 2019; Banibangou, 21 January 2023; Ouallam, 4 June 2023) and the release of local and international hostages, constant conflicts over participation, representation and the legitimacy of mediators prevented the dialogue initiatives from moving towards a coherent goal and identifying sustainable conflict resolution strategies.

Local actors criticised the appropriation of Nigerien peace efforts by international organisations and the creation of parallel dialogue structures. They accused the international

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Maclean, "Niger Islamic State hostage: 'They want to kill foreign soldiers'", *The Guardian*, 5 June 2018, accessed 9 August 2024; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery* (3 June 2020), 9–10, last accessed 7 August 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Maclean, "Niger Islamic State hostage".

<sup>18</sup> French: Haute Autorité à la consolidation de la paix.



NGOs of lacking knowledge of local contexts and an ethnic approach to conflict analysis, which they said further deepened social divisions. Interviewees told the author that the red line imposed by international NGOs and donors (i.e. support for terrorism) had made it more difficult to address conflict situations. For example, members of jihadist groups were excluded from many local dialogue and mediation processes.

Interviewees also criticised the commercialisation of dialogue and mediation initiatives. Competition for donor funding fuelled conflicts and hampered coordination, for example between the Ministry of the Interior and the HACP. Standardised formats and their focus on short-term measurable results also hindered continuity of negotiation processes and the identification of relevant key individuals who could have had a positive influence on the course of the conflict. One local peace activist also criticised the inclusion in an internationally supported peace agreement of demands for the state to promote regional economic development. “The state has invested millions in roads and other infrastructure, but the [jihadist] groups continue to exist. Mediation is not a project with log frames and indicators that can be sold,” he said in an interview with the author. Additionally, the medialisation of local peace efforts hampered confidential processes.

The payment of daily allowances and the distribution of aid also had the effect of turning dialogue formats and demobilisation programmes into a lucrative and opaque business. That accusation has also been confirmed by the *International Crisis Group*. In September 2018, for example, village chiefs are said to have inflated the numbers of combatants willing to demobilise after the HACP promised food aid for selected communities in the course of a dialogue forum in the Tillabéri region.<sup>19</sup> And an interviewee from the Ministry of the Interior told the author that he doubted the existence of two thousand members of jihadist groups who, according to the HACP, had been waiting in the Tillabéri region since the beginning of 2023 to take part in the government’s exit programme. It is therefore impossible to make any reliable statements about the actual number of combatants demobilised as a result of dialogue initiatives.

More serious, however, is the observation by interlocutors from security circles and even among mediators that jihadist groups have been strengthened rather than weakened by the fragmented dialogue initiatives. Because the dividing lines between jihadist groups and local communities are blurred, jihadist violent actors have benefited from partial ceasefires and local peace agreements between hostile socio-economic groups, using the affected areas to rest, re-equip and recruit. One mediator pointed to the absence of the state in implementing the results of local dialogue processes as the cause of this unintended negative effect.

That accusation also played a role in the regional context. For example, until the military coup in 2023 Niger was denigrated in social media in Mali and Burkina Faso as a safe haven for jihadists. The extent to which these accusations were true is difficult to verify. The fact is that the security crisis in Burkina Faso and Mali worsened at the same time as the deadly violence in Niger’s border region of Tillabéri decreased.<sup>20</sup> Since the beginning of 2022, ISSP in particular has shifted its activities from the Tillabéri region to the neighbouring regions of Menaka and Ansongo-Gao in Mali.<sup>21</sup> However, this is also because the withdrawal of the French Barkhane military mission from Mali in the same year created a security vacuum in northern Mali, which was exploited by jihadist groups to further consolidate their presence.

<sup>19</sup> International Crisis Group, *Sidelining*, 9–10.

<sup>20</sup> ACLED, “10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2022: The Sahel Mid-Year Update”, accessed 12 August 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Abd’Allah, “Dans le nord-est du Mali, l’État islamique en voie de ‘normalisation?’”, *afriqueXXI*, 13 November 2023, accessed 12 August 2024.

Since February 2022, violent clashes between ISSP and groups loyal to al-Qaeda in northern Mali have also led to a concentration of fighters there.<sup>22</sup>

## Lack of Coordination between Civil and Military Measures

In addition to the fragmentation and commercialisation of dialogue initiatives, resistance and sabotage on the part of the military elite also significantly reduced the chances of success of the “policy of the outstretched hand” from the outset. Instead of using military force to create pressure for negotiations (in the sense of a dual strategy), the lack of coordination between military and civilian approaches jeopardised the trust of the conflict parties in the dialogue and mediation initiatives and triggered a further escalation of violence.

In 2017, for example, the army leadership vetoed talks with ISGS in the National Security Council – a position that was also supported by the then President Mahamadou Issoufou.<sup>23</sup> Participants in the dialogue forum with representatives of the Peul from the Tillabéri region, which was convened that year, suspect that this was attributable to pressure from the French government. Paris had set the scene for a military crackdown on jihadist actors by deploying its own troops and was also said to have successfully argued for the termination of talks with leaders of jihadist groups in neighbouring Mali.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, while members of the dialogue forum initiated by Bazoum sent emissaries to hold talks with ISGS in 2017 and 2018, the French Barkhane military mission and Malian Tuareg-militias attacked what were said to be ISGS positions in the Malian-Nigerien border region in collusion with the Nigerien government. This not only fuelled inter-ethnic conflicts and cost the dialogue forum credibility in the conflict-ridden communities. It also jeopardised the lives of the mediators involved. The abduction, torture and presumed murder of Oumarou “Kiro” Roua, the government’s chief mediator and member of the dialogue forum, by ISGS in April 2019 is a case in point.<sup>25</sup> Other intermediaries, although appointed by the state, were accused by the secret service of supporting terrorist organisations and arrested.

Military counter-terrorism operations also threatened to jeopardise the latest mediation efforts in the Banibangou department, which is affected by local conflicts and jihadist violence. Although Islamic State is said to have officially distanced itself from the peace negotiations, local sources reported that the organisation’s combatants in the region expressed their willingness not to disrupt the process. The initiators of the dialogue initiative therefore hoped that a peace agreement would encourage the hostile local communities to disengage from jihadist and other armed groups.

However, the assassination of several IS commanders by the Nigerien and French military near the Malian-Nigerian border shortly after the signing of the peace treaty in January 2023 promptly led to violent reprisals by the terrorist organisation.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the operation

<sup>22</sup> David Baché, “Violents affrontements entre groupes jihadistes rivaux dans le nord du Mali”, *rfi*, 15 February 2022, accessed 12 August 2024.

<sup>23</sup> François Soudan, “Mahamadou Issoufou: ‘Ma décision de respecter la Constitution et de ne pas me représenter est irrévocable’”, *Jeune Afrique*, 14 August 2019, accessed 9 August 2024; International Crisis Group, *Sidelining*.

<sup>24</sup> Adam Sandor, “Turning point? Mali’s potential dialogue with Jihadists”, *BulletinFrancoPaix*, February 2020, 7; In an interview published in *Jeune Afrique* in November 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron confirmed his rejection of dialogue initiatives with “terrorists” in the Sahel: “Macron sur le Sahel: ‘Avec les terroristes, on ne discute pas, on combat’”, *Le Parisien*, 20 November 2020, accessed 9 August 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with dialogue forum representative, Niamey, February 2023; “Niger: qu’est-il arrivé à Oumarou Roua, disparu vers Tongo Tongo le 11 avril?”, *rfi*, 18 May 2019, accessed 9 August 2024.

<sup>26</sup> “Niger: des civils maliens tués par des hommes armés non loin de la frontière malienne”, *rfi*, 4 February 2023, accessed 12 August 2024; “Niger: au moins dix soldats tués dans une attaque djihadiste à la frontière du Mali”, *Le Monde*, 11 February 2023, accessed 12 August 2024.



fuelled anger and frustration among the parties involved in the conflict resolution process, who felt that their efforts had been thwarted by the political leaders in Niamey. According to local reports, not even the prefect of Banibangou was informed of the military measures, although high-ranking army representatives had attended the peace treaty signing ceremony just a few days earlier. For many observers, the Banibangou agreement, which the media celebrated as a success, is therefore also a farce, as it has neither contributed to disarmament of the conflict parties nor led to a reduction in jihadist violence.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion and Outlook

In view of the failure of internationally supported counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel region, Niger's "special approach" to dealing with jihadist violence gave reason to hope for a way out of the ongoing security crisis.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the results of Bazoum's "policy of outstretched hands" are sobering. Dialogue and mediation initiatives certainly contributed to the demobilisation of combatants and the signing of local peace agreements and cease-fires. But a sustainable, negotiated conflict resolution was still a long way off.

In order to end the violence on the basis of dialogue formats, it is necessary to properly address the political concerns of jihadist actors. On the one hand, this means acknowledging the structural problems that have contributed to the successful mobilisations of IS and al-Qaeda offshoots in the region. On the other hand, a continuous consultation process must be established to discuss what the parties to the conflict and the population affected by violence expect of a negotiated solution. As jihadist violent actors in the Sahel operate across borders, a regionally coordinated approach would be necessary to prevent a geographical displacement of violence as a result of a peace agreement.

However, a clear political strategy, to which both military measures and possible interventions by external partners are subordinate, is an essential prerequisite for a fruitful process. Even if it ultimately remains to be seen whether consensual compromises can be found on the basis of dialogue, political decision-makers should examine all viable options in view of the increase in violence and the ongoing suffering of the civilian population.

Comprehensive negotiations would certainly also mean that central elements of the political systems of the Sahel countries would be up for discussion. A compromise could, for example, include the abolition of state secularism. Because fundamentalist interpretations of Islam have gained in importance throughout the Sahel's societies over the last ten years – well beyond the areas of influence of jihadist groups – it is possible that there would be no major domestic political resistance to such a step. A decentralised formalisation of jihadist territorial control would also be conceivable as part of a political compromise. However, public acceptance of the possible curtailment of fundamental rights (including women's rights) that this would entail remains questionable. Yet, it is also possible that jihadist violent actors could agree to a pragmatic arrangement orientated on the needs of the local population – as has already happened in some local micro-arrangements.

With the recent military coup, the prospect of a political agreement with jihadist groups in Niger has receded for the time being. The new rulers have revised the national strategy for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, and remain committed to continuing the

<sup>27</sup> Delina Goxho, "Self-defense Militia Groups in Niger: Risking a Time Bomb", Policy Brief 17, *Megatrends Afrika* (Berlin: October 2023), accessed 12 August 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Armstrong, *Comprendre l'accalmie*; Fahiraman Rodrigue Koné and Hassane Koné, "Y-a-t-il une exception nigérienne dans la lutte contre le terrorisme?", *Institute for Security Studies*, 21 March 2023, last accessed 12 August 2024.

exit programme for fighters from non-state armed organisations. And the HACP, under new leadership, is also continuing to seek dialogue with communities affected and threatened by violence at local level, albeit without access to international project funding, which was suspended following the coup. Discreet, tactical ceasefire agreements with violent actors or negotiations for the release of hostages are also likely to continue in the future, as suggested by the case of the liberation of six Nigerien soldiers captured by JNIM during the attack in Boni in the south of the Tillabéri region in May 2024.<sup>29</sup> Yet it is not currently foreseeable that the new rulers would agree to opening official negotiations with jihadist groups.

Firstly, by founding the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and intensifying military cooperation with Russia in conjunction with the neighbouring countries of Mali and Burkina Faso, the new rulers in Niamey are focusing on expanding a regionally coordinated military counter-terrorism campaign that is characterised by the ruthless and indiscriminate use of force and therefore leaves no room for opening talks with jihadist organisations. Secondly, the junta derives its political legitimacy not only from rigorous military action, but also from its strict rejection of a negotiated conflict resolution with jihadist actors.

However, the violent actors have deep local roots and their military defeat has not become any more likely. Rather, it is to be expected that the increasing militarisation of politics and society in Niger, as in Mali and Burkina Faso, will lead to massive human rights violations, an erosion of social cohesion and an increase in the number of victims of violence.<sup>30</sup> According to the *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)*, the number of fatalities caused by political violence more than doubled in the year following the coup compared to the previous year.<sup>31</sup>

For European decision-makers, the scope for action in the area of dialogue promotion in Niger therefore remains severely limited for the time being. However, the findings from the case study illustrate the conditions under which dialogue with violent jihadist actors can succeed and the conditions that may also need to be met in other conflict contexts.

*Lisa Tschörner is a Researcher at Megatrends Afrika and an Associate with the Africa and Middle East Research Division at SWP.*

<sup>29</sup> Facilitation dans la libération des otages de Boni: L'expression d'un patriotisme désintéressé – ONEP (lesahel.org); ActuNiger | Insécurité: 7 soldats tués et une dizaine de terroristes tués dans une attaque à Boni, près de la frontière burkinabé – ActuNiger.

<sup>30</sup> Tanguy Quidelleur, "Arming Civilians in Burkina Faso. The State, the War on Terror and the Militarisation of Society", Policy Brief 22, *Megatrends Afrika* (Berlin: February 2024), last accessed 12 August 2024.; Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Islamist Armed Groups, Ethnic Militias Commit Atrocities. Provide Accountability, Improve Protection for Civilians", 8 May 2024, last accessed 12 August 2024.

<sup>31</sup> ACLED, "Regional Overview Africa July 2024, Niger: Escalating violence in Tillabéri and worsening security post-coup", 12 August 2024, last accessed 12 August 2024.

### Megatrends Afrika

is a joint project of SWP, IDOS and IfW.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).

All project publications are subject to an internal peer review process.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

**SWP** Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik | German

Institute for International and Security Affairs

**IDOS** German Institute of Development and Sustainability

**IfW** Kiel Institute for the World Economy

[www.megatrends-afrika.de](http://www.megatrends-afrika.de)

[megatrends-afrika@swp-berlin.org](mailto:megatrends-afrika@swp-berlin.org)

ISSN 2747-4119

DOI 10.18449/2024MTA-PB31

Funded by: