

CIVILIANS FACING INSECURITY IN NIGER'S TILLABÉRI REGION



CENTER FOR
CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT
SINCE 2003

RECOGNIZE. PREVENT. PROTECT. AMEND.

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Cover: *The triborder region of the Sahel*

Credit: Bakary Diouara

ORGANIZATION MISSION AND VISION

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is an international organization dedicated to promoting the protection of civilians caught in conflict. CIVIC's mission is to work with armed actors and civilians in conflict to develop and implement solutions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to civilian harm. Our vision is a world where parties to armed conflict recognize the dignity and rights of civilians, prevent civilian harm, protect civilians caught in the conflict, and amend harm.

CIVIC was established in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a young American activist and humanitarian who advocated on behalf of civilian war victims and their families in Iraq and Afghanistan. Building on her extraordinary legacy, CIVIC now operates in conflict zones throughout the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and South East Asia to advance a higher standard of protection for civilians.

At CIVIC, we believe that parties to armed conflict are responsible for preventing and addressing civilian harm. To accomplish this, we assess the causes of civilian harm, in particular conflicts; craft practical solutions to address that harm; and advocate for the adoption of new policies and practices that lead to the improved wellbeing of civilians caught in conflict. Recognizing the power of collaboration, we engage with civilians, governments, militaries, and international and regional institutions to identify and institutionalize strengthened protection for civilians in conflict.

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2014, the Tillabéri region located in Western Niger, bordering Mali, Benin and Burkina Faso, has faced insecurity linked to armed opposition groups (AOGs), crime and communal conflicts. Until 2020, AOGs mainly targeted local authorities and state security and defense forces (SDF). For example, they illegally taxed civilians and extorted goods from them, but rarely physically assaulted them.

In 2021, however, the situation shifted and AOGs began targeting civilians during the armed operations. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), fatalities resulting from violence against civilians by AOGs increased by 52 percent in 2021 compared to 2020.¹ Despite this rise in civilian fatalities, the Niger armed forces maintain a weak presence at the border with Mali and have faced heightened attacks by AOGs against their military bases. Some communities have created self-defense groups, including the Banibangou self-defense group,² to help fill the security vacuum and protect themselves against the attacks of armed actors.

Although violence against civilians continues, 2022 saw a reduction. ACLED recorded 192 fatalities in 2022 resulting from violence against civilians compared to 465 in 2021. Similarly, the number of civilian fatalities in the first two months of 2023 decreased³ compared to the same period in 2022. However, the July 26, 2023 military coup in which Mohamed Bazoum was deposed could improve or worsen the situation of civilians living in conflict-affected areas.

Civilians interviewed by CIVIC noted an improvement in security in 2022 illustrated by the reopening of markets and the return of some internally displaced persons (IDPs) to villages and farms in the region.⁴ This improvement in the security situation and a relative return to “normal life” are mainly due to four factors.⁵

First, recent state responses, including military patrols in almost all departments of the Tillabéri region, dialogue with insurgents that begun in February 2022 and led to the reintegration of former AOG fighters, and the Forum for Security, Social Cohesion and Sustainable Development in the Tillabéri region held in March 2022. Second, the resurgence of Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) activism targeting mainly state actors has decreased the number of affected civilians. Third, competition between IS Sahel and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, or JNIM) over Mali’s Menaka territory since March 2022 has shifted attention and focus from Tillabéri to neighboring Mali.⁶ Fourth, civilians’ willingness to accept AOGs’ illegal taxation has led to decreased retributive attacks against them.

Despite the temporary reduction in civilian casualties, the drastic shift in violence against civilians in the Tillabéri region since 2021 is a negative turning point in the evolution of the conflict.

Despite the temporary reduction in civilian casualties, the drastic shift in violence against civilians in the Tillabéri region since 2021 is a negative turning point in the evolution of the conflict. Until 2020, the Tillabéri region had been the least targeted zone for mass attacks against civilians in the Central Sahel.⁷ But the creation of self-defense groups in response to the insurgency⁸ suggests that more attention should be paid to the threats to civilian safety resulting from the conflict.



The triborder region of the Sahel

This report is based on 186 open-ended, structured, and semi-structured interviews and six focus groups, conducted between July and September 2022, with civilians (victims, IDPs, refugees, and host communities), Banibangou self-defense group members, SDF members, local authorities and humanitarian actors in five departments of the Tillabéri region and Niamey. It analyzes the protection against civilian threats posed by all the armed actors operating in the Tillabéri region. It also assesses the existing protection opportunities for civilians, and how civilians understand them, what challenges they face in implementing them, and the lessons learned.

According to civilians, military and humanitarian sources, and protection monitoring organizations, AOGs are the main actors responsible for harming civilians in the Tillabéri region. The Banibangou self-defense group, although established as a “community self-defense mechanism”, has also harmed civilians, albeit to a lesser extent (Infographic 1). The insecurity has further led to the displacement of some civilians to chief towns of the departments of Tillabéri and urban areas of Niger that are more secure. According to Niger’s Ministry of Humanitarian Action and Disaster Management, 153 455 IDPs were dispersed over 12 of the 13 departments of the region as of September 5, 2022.

The insecurity and displacement have disrupted civilian livelihoods and limited their access to basic social services such as education, medical care, and public services. While IDPs themselves face numerous challenges, the civilians who stay behind in AOG-controlled territories and host communities that receive IDPs are often less talked about and vulnerable and are also deeply impacted. For example, some of the host communities have temporarily given their land or crop fields as space for IDPs to build their shelters.

Civilians in Tillabéri are caught in the crossfire between the AOGs that have traditionally posed the biggest threat to them, and the national security and defense forces and local armed actors who mobilized to protect them. As AOGs battle each other to impose their rules, they view the allegiance of civilians with suspicion, and it is ultimately civilians who pay the price. Many are killed while many more lose their properties, livelihoods and dignity. AOGs have committed targeted killings, assassinations, kidnappings, acts of extortion, theft, and looting of civilian goods. They have also destroyed civilian property and public infrastructure, illegally collected taxes from civilians, used improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and forced civilian displacement.

Conversely, the temporary presence of SDF in villages and hamlets in Tillabéri and their interactions with civilians expose the villagers to retaliatory attacks by AOGs. The latter target civilians to stop any collaboration with the military, thus leaving them without protection. Similarly, AOGs and Banibangou self-defense group members prey on civilians to generate funds to support their operations and livelihoods.

AOGs primarily target representatives of the state, such as local authorities, as well as customary and religious leaders who do not support them. Other adult male community members are at higher risk of experiencing violence. Children, women, elders, people living with disabilities, and host communities of IDPs are indirectly affected by AOG violence. They suffer the humanitarian implications of the conflict, such as displacement, and women are at risk of becoming single heads of households and victims of gender-based violence.

In response to the insecurity, the SDF conduct military operations and enforce security decisions taken by the political authorities. However, in implementing their operations, they occasionally cause harm to civilians. Some decisions by national authorities have also negatively affected livelihoods in communities, causing protection risks. Decisions such as the state of emergency, measures that restrict mobility, and banning the use of certain types of motorcycles can seriously affect communities' mobility, access to services, livelihoods and markets and result in serious concerns about the protection of civilians.

During military operations in Tillabéri and “search of suspected AOG members”, the SDF unintentionally destroyed civilian property. Civilians also complained that SDF arrested alleged accomplices without providing follow-up information to the families on the result of the arrest and of investigations.

Likewise, the Banibangou self-defense group has been responsible for targeted killings, and extortion of civilian goods, including livestock, theft and destruction of civilian property. This demonstrates how even some protection mechanisms put in place by communities can come with risks, and exacerbate their situation, or create new threats. For example, the emergence of the Banibangou self-defense group and its geographic expansion to neighboring villages has led to harmful actions and now represents a threat to civilians.

This report presents recommendations on how decision makers, stakeholders and armed actors and their partners operating in Tillabéri can better protect civilians from the variety of intertwined threats they face.

It is divided into three sections that support these recommendations. The first gives a background of Tillabéri's current insecurity and the attacks against civilians as well as the evolution of civilian casualties. The second discusses the threats to the protection of civilians in detail. The final section assesses civilians' perspectives on opportunities to address gaps in existing protection efforts.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government of Niger and its SDF:

Prevent and combat acts of predation or physical violence against civilians and their property caused by the AOGs and armed bandits by:

- Accelerating the planned recruitment of new SDF personnel in the next two years as a priority to make up for the shortage of security and defense personnel on the ground;
- Deploying more SDF in the Tillabéri region to ensure effective and permanent coverage of the highest at-risk areas;
- Intensifying patrols in at-risk areas rather than in departmental capitals.

Prevent and combat abuses against civilians through Niger SDF actions and other partner military forces by:

- Identifying best practices in terms of civilian harm mitigation (CHM) efforts conducted during operations in the Tillabéri region and the results achieved, and applying them to new operations;
- Creating a learning and experience sharing framework between SDF members, to favor the development of additional CHM efforts;
- Systematically conducting investigations and ensuring accountability when SDF personnel commit abuses against civilians to discourage and prevent such behavior in the future and strengthen relationships with populations;
- Establishing and continuing awareness-raising sessions for populations on the SDF missions and mandate as well as civil-military dialogue on the protection of civilians.

Protect civilians from the Banibangou self-defense group's harmful actions by:

- Mapping the members of the sub-groups affiliated with this self-defense group, their geographical presence, means of action, means of mobilization of resources, and organization;
- Understanding and addressing the root causes of the Banibangou self-defense group's harmful actions;
- Developing a national security/defense strategy for how the self-defense group is used and phased out through disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR);
- Providing them with training on international humanitarian law, human rights, civilian harm tracking, and CHM;
- Developing accountability measures such as a code of conduct.

Mitigate (limit) the adverse effects of the state of emergency and restrictive measures on the civilian population by:

- Conducting awareness-raising sessions to explain the behaviors that civilians should adopt, and the validity of curfew measures and other harmful restrictions put in place;
- Conducting more continuous analysis of the impact of measures on civilians, taking their opinions and those of all local actors into account, and drawing lessons learned;
- Accompanying these measures with alternative options for populations already affected by non-state armed actors' presence and actions.

Improve rapid responses to the alerts of populations, local authorities and customary chiefs by:

- Identifying (in collaboration with populations) and reinforcing secure channels for civilians to alert authorities and the SDF on threats to civilians, or incidents;
- Addressing the population's, local authorities', and customary chiefs' alerts, responses, gaps, and feedback through dialogue.

Provide additional assistance to populations, families, and households deprived of their assets, livelihoods, and heads, as well as to civilians living with trauma resulting from violence by non-state armed actors.

The humanitarian actors and the government of Niger should:

Improve protection and assistance efforts to populations in need—IDPs, refugees, returnees, civilians who stayed back in the villages and at-risk communities—by:

- Raising the awareness of local authorities, state technical services, and partners on the effective compliance with law 2018-74 on the protection and assistance of IDPs in Niger;
- Systematically sheltering IDPs, and organizing and protecting IDP sites where this is the preferred option for the displaced persons;
- Working on the improvement of the returning conditions of IDPs by providing security and infrastructure in their location of origin.

Invest more in the sustainable resolution of longstanding and poorly managed community conflicts in the Tillabéri region by:

- Encouraging local conflict resolution initiatives between communities;
- Identifying and addressing challenges to the sustainability of local peace structures and their actions for social cohesion and resolution of community conflicts.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research project started in April 2022 and ended in May 2023. The terms used in this research project include the following: protection of civilians, threats, opportunities, and civilian populations.

Protection of civilians includes all efforts or actions taken by actors to protect civilians from any harm during the conflict. The actors present in the research area are the AOGs (JNIM,⁹ affiliated with al-Qaeda, and IS Sahel); Banibangou self-defense group; criminal actors; Niger's SDF and their partners at regional and international levels; local authorities; and civilians.

Threats refer to possible harm to civilians resulting from the presence, activities, and operations of armed actors including the AOGs, Banibangou self-defense group, and SDF.

Opportunities are mechanisms, initiatives, and capacities that exist or that could be put in place to reduce or mitigate the threats to the protection of civilians and their consequences. Those opportunities are defined and implemented by civilians themselves, local authorities, non-state actors, SDF, or national authorities and their partners.

Civilian populations are all people who are not, or are no longer, members of an AOG or self-defense group or any armed group.

The study was designed and implemented by a team of nine people (two women and seven men) including six nationals from Niger, and composed of researchers and protection of civilian experts from CIVIC. A literature review of existing studies was undertaken to collect secondary data, identify the evolution of the insecurity in Niger's Tillabéri region, and cross-check the data collected from the field.

The field data collection took place in different phases between July and September 2022. For this research, CIVIC conducted 186 open-ended, structured, and semi-structured interviews based on modular interview guides and six focus group discussions with a maximum of five people.

Women who took part in data collection participated in nine percent of individual interviews and 100 percent of focus group discussions. Few women were interviewed. Some refused to take part in research that touched on security issues in the Tillabéri region, and others said interlocutors in past surveys had been arrested after sharing information. Others preferred focus group discussions to semi-structured interviews, but it was difficult to hold many as the SDF are against the gathering of people due to the security context.

Participants belonged to three defined categories (Infographic 2) for this study. Many people were interviewed in order for researchers to understand civilian experiences in conflict-affected areas. This includes victims, internally displaced persons, survivors, and witnesses. CIVIC met interviewees with diverse profiles from nine communities. Interviews were done in four national languages and French. At the beginning of each interview or focus group discussion, verbal informed consent was obtained from the participants. The team ensured that they understood the objective of the research and how the information they shared would be used. Researchers ensured that they were aware that all data was collected anonymously and that no incentive for participation would be given.

Before the data collection period, consultative meetings were conducted in Niamey and Tillabéri and research authorization was obtained from the governorate of the region. After an internal data analysis phase, a closed-door validation workshop was organized in Tillabéri with representatives of national state and local authorities of the research areas, and selected humanitarian actors and civil society leaders. In addition to validating the data, this was done to build ownership and buy-in of the actors.

Data was collected in Abala (commune of Abala and Sanam), Ouallam (commune of Tondikiwindi and village of Mangaizé), Téra (commune of Diagourou and Téra), Torodi (commune of Makalondi and Torodi), and Tillabéri (commune of Tillabéri and village Tadress)—departments of Niger's Tillabéri region. The data collection in Ouallam and Torodi provides information on the conflict respectively in the commune of Banibangou, at the border with Mali, and the village of Bossey-Bangou bordering Burkina Faso. Interviews were also conducted in Niamey with state, humanitarian, and civil society actors and some civilians originating from the research areas (Infographic 3).

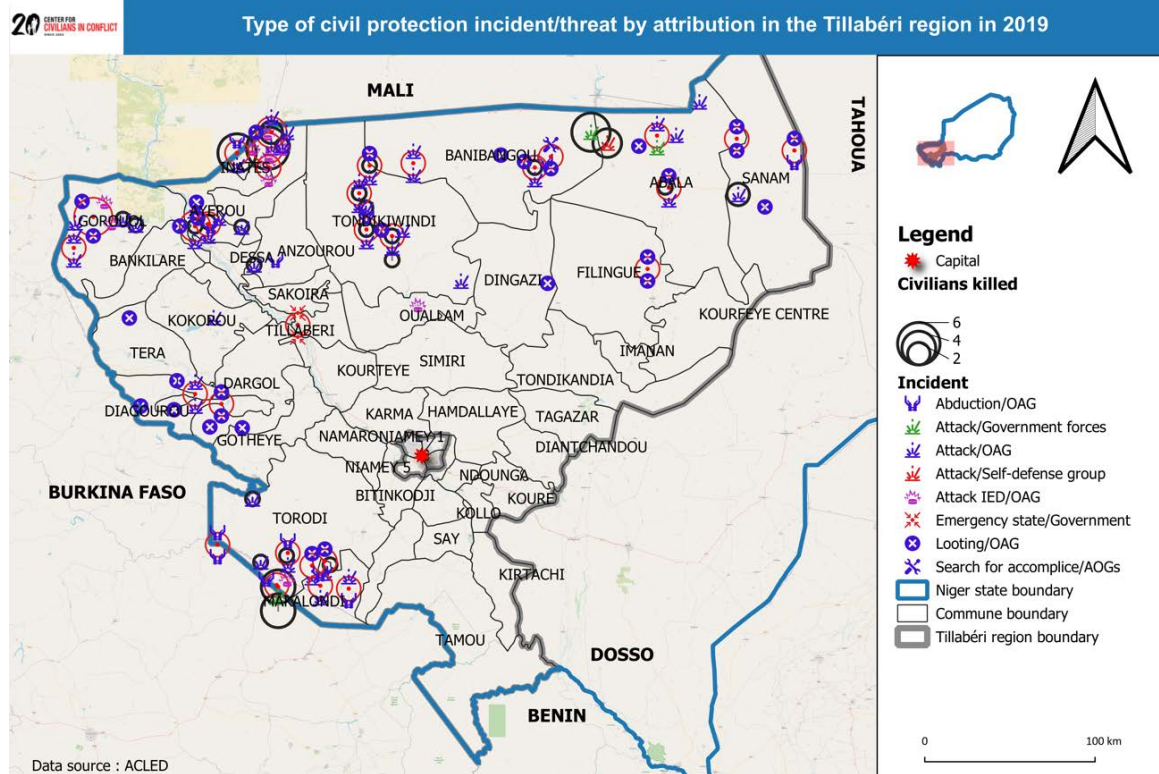
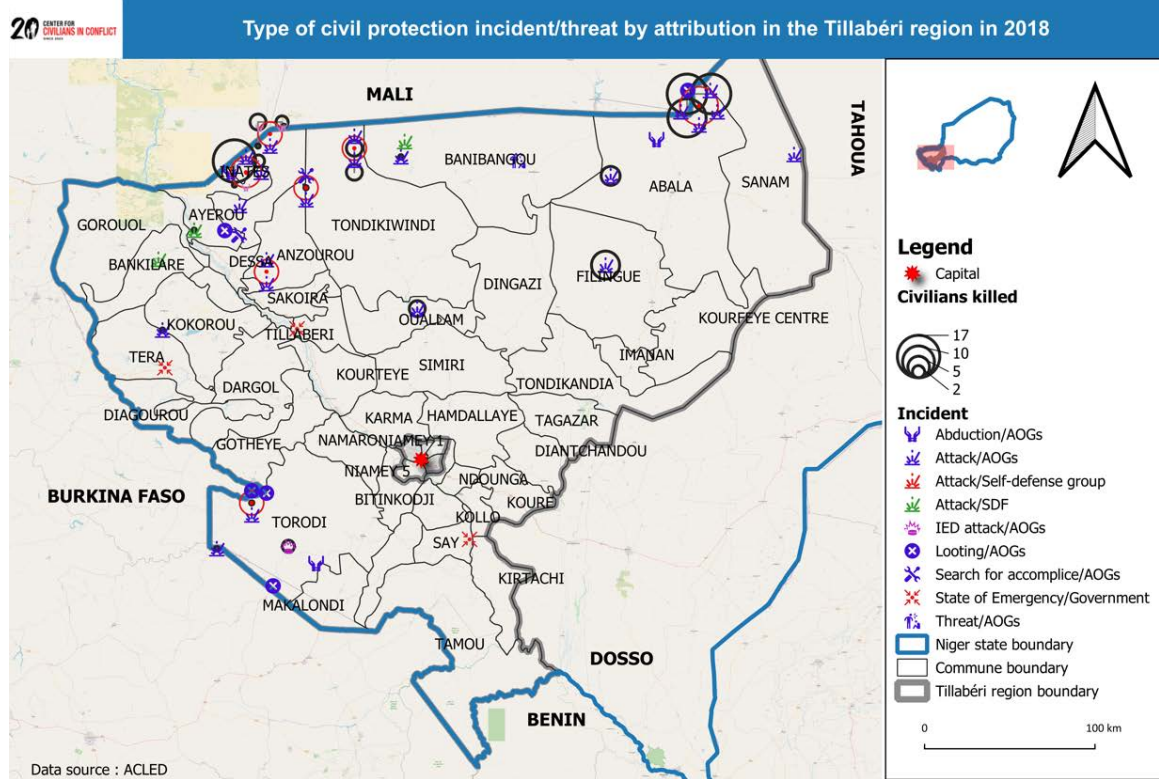
The data collection faced many operational challenges. The main one was linked to the security situation in the Tillabéri region and its effects. The presence and activities of AOGs and the security measures taken by the state including military operations and states of emergency made traveling and access to some locations highly risky. In addition, insecurity in the data collection areas created a context of suspicion and fear, which made it difficult to access all interlocutors and discuss sensitive matters.

Because of the way insecurity has undermined livelihoods in the area, civilians were also primarily interested in humanitarian assistance rather than participating in research aimed at influencing policy. Adding to that, attacks on communications infrastructure such as antennas made it difficult to exchange and share data for remote communication or to coordinate logistics.

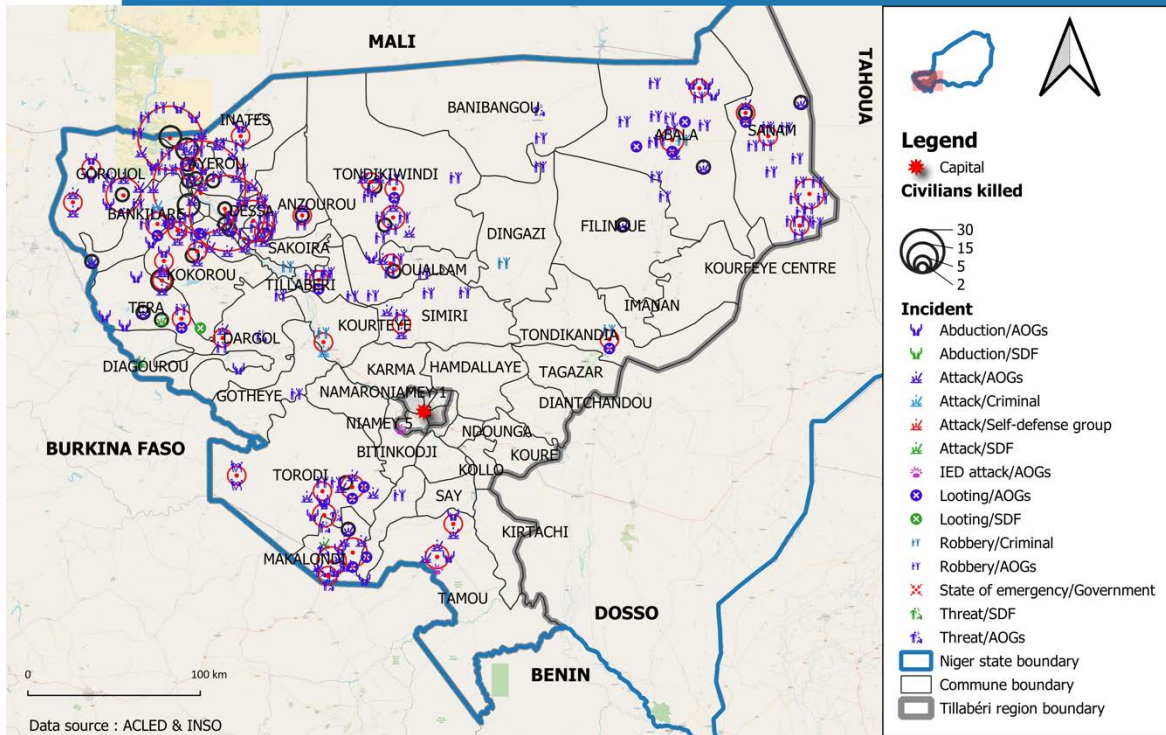
It was not possible to meet former or current members of AOGs to get their perspectives on the protection of civilians in the research area. The security context was too risky to undertake such an initiative on the ground. The authorization obtained from the Governorate of Tillabéri also did not enable the research team to have official or in-depth interviews with the leadership of the SDF. The limited number of meetings held with the SDF members provided the researchers with general background information on the conflict's dynamics.

INFOGRAPHIC 1:

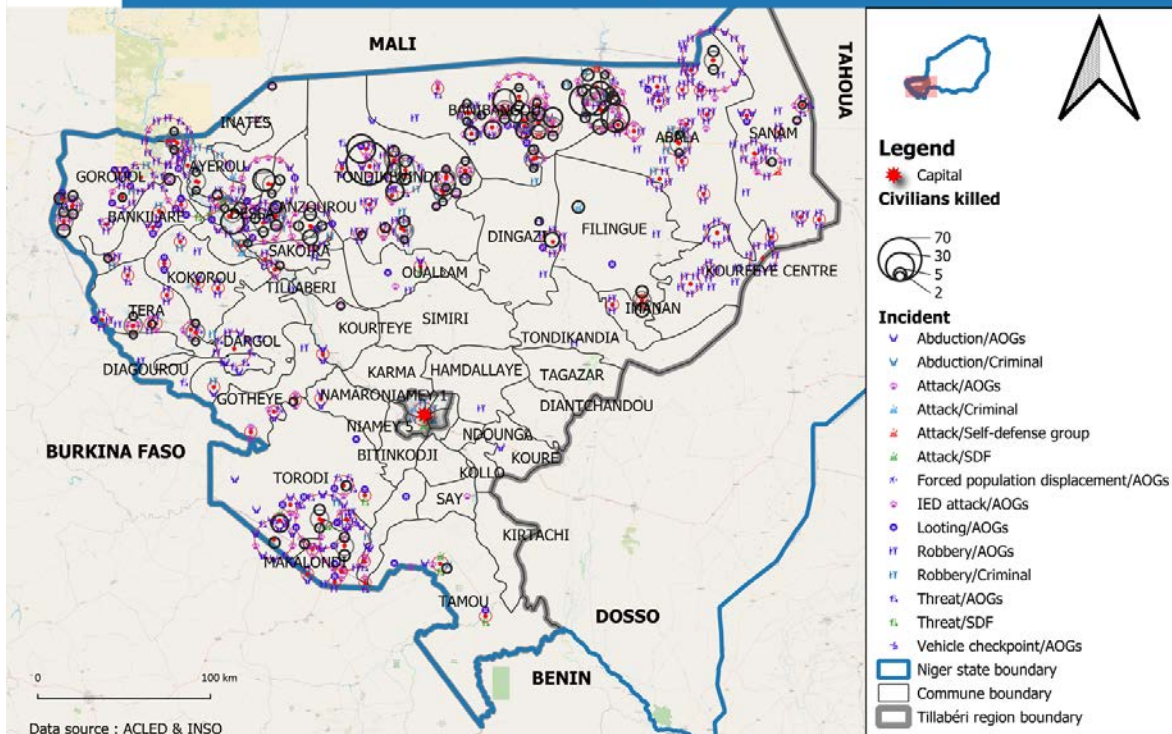
Evolution of civilian protection incidents in Niger's Tillabéri region



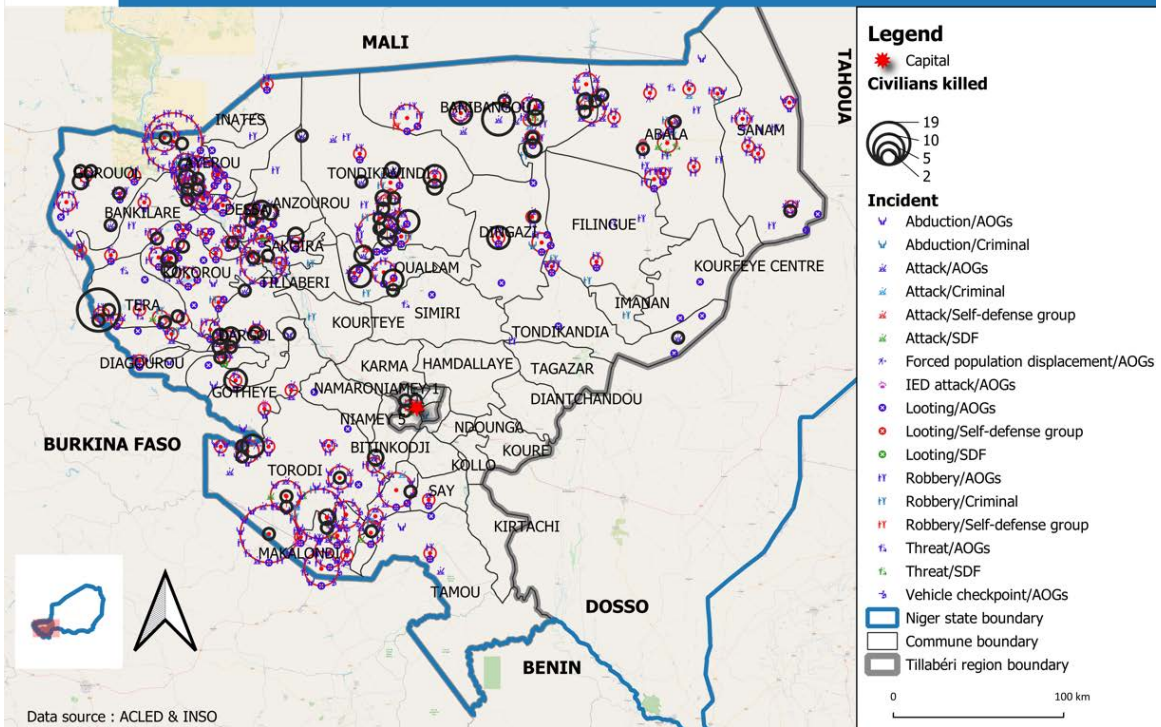
Type of civil protection incident/threat by attribution in the Tillabéri region in 2020



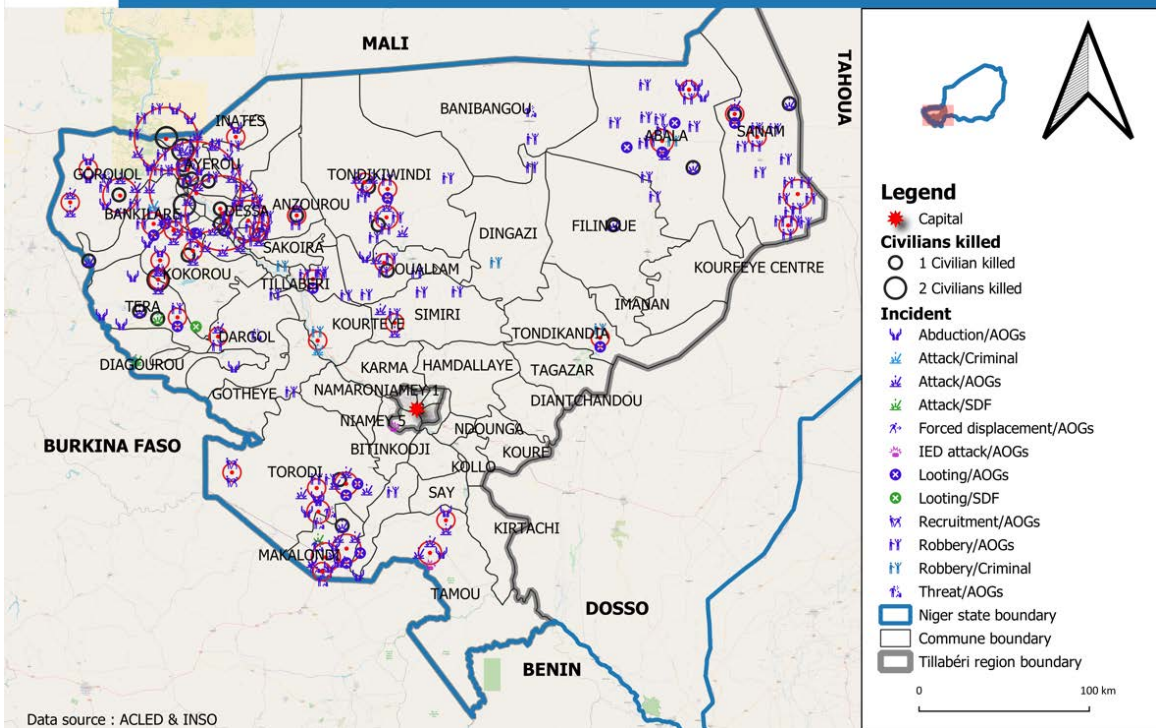
Type of civil protection incident/threat by attribution in the Tillabéri region in 2021



Type of civil protection incident/threat by attribution in the Tillabéri region in 2022



Type of civil protection incident/threat by attribution in the Tillabéri region from January to April 2023



INFOGRAPHIC 2:

Categories of key interlocutors

CATEGORIES OF KEY INTERLOCUTORS

INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS OF PEOPLE ABUSED BY
AOGs, SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS, OTHER ORGANIZED
CRIMINALS AND/OR SDF :



VICTIMS



WITNESSES



INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPs)

ARMED ACTORS



NON-STATE ACTORS - FORMER AND CURRENT
MEMBERS OF SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS



STATE - MEMBERS OF THE SDF

INDIVIDUALS WHO BY VIRTUE OF THEIR FUNCTION OR
SOCIO-PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY HAVE ACCESS TO INFORMATION ON
ABUSES AGAINST CIVILIANS IN THE TILLABÉRI REGION OF NIGER



SDF



STATE REPRESENTATIVES AT REGIONAL, DEPARTMENTAL
AND COMMUNAL LEVEL



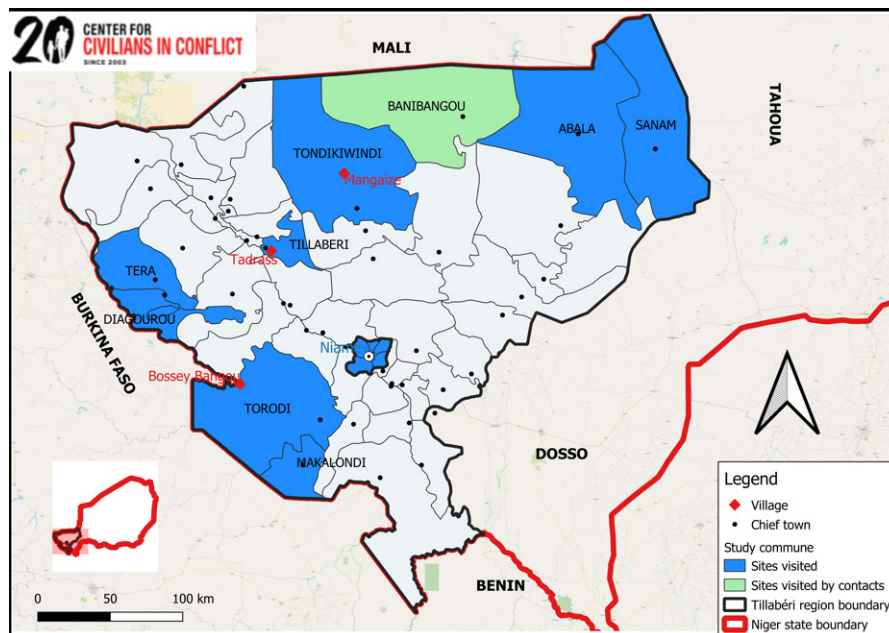
CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS



IDP HOST COMMUNITY

INFOGRAPHIC 3:

Research areas



IV. BACKGROUND TO INSECURITY IN TILLABÉRI

The Tillabéri region of Western Niger is home to a significant portion of the country's shared borders with Burkina Faso and Mali. Civilians in the porous border region remain vulnerable to violence from JNIM and IS Sahel, who have operated in these difficult to reach and less governed areas for almost a decade. While numerous factors including poorly managed community conflicts and banditry have led to the expansion of JNIM and IS Sahel in Tillabéri, these have increasingly turned their attacks against civilians in recent years.

ARMED ACTORS IN TILLABÉRI

Niger's security and defense forces: SDF deployed in the Tillabéri region include the Niger Armed Forces, National Gendarmerie, National Police, and Nigerien National Guard (Garde Nationale du Niger, GNN).¹⁰ The army, estimated at between 15 000 and 20 000¹¹ (2017) troops, are responsible for the defense of national territory against any external aggression and participate, alongside the other forces, in the preservation of peace and security. The Gendarmerie, numbering around 8 600¹² (2017), focus principally on public safety, to ensure the maintenance of order, and the enforcement of laws in the national territory. The National Police, numbering between 7 000 and 7 200¹³ (2017), focuses mainly on maintaining public order. It also oversees the administrative, judicial, and forensic police. Lastly, the National Guard has 9 000¹⁴ (2017) officers in charge of security and protection of national buildings and public authorities. It also participates in military operations.

With the emergence of the insecurity and conflict linked to AOG activities in the country, the National Police and Gendarmerie have increasingly been deployed to fight alongside the Niger Armed Forces and the GNN. SDF also conducts civil-military actions such as the distribution of food, medicine, and medical campaigns for civilians in conflict-affected areas as a means to strengthen the collaboration between the state armed forces and the population.¹⁵

The G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S): Created in 2017 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, the FC-G5S is mandated to combat terrorism and drug trafficking; contribute to the restoration of state authority and the return of displaced persons and refugees; facilitate humanitarian operations and the delivery of aid to affected populations, as far as possible; and contribute to the implementation of the G5 Sahel development strategies.¹⁶ The FC-G5S comprises 5 000 military, gendarmes, and police officers. The military component was organized into seven battalions of 650 members split into three geographic areas of operation (fuseaux) before its restructuring.¹⁷ Niamey originally hosted the command post of the central sector for the FC-G5S before the change in force structure following Mali's withdrawal from the G5. One of the three battalions of this fuseau is based in Téra in the Tillabéri region. A number of military operations have been conducted by the FC-G5S since its deployment, including seven military operations in the three sectors in 2022.¹⁸ In May 2022, Mali withdrew from the G5 Sahel and all its institutions. As a result, the Joint Force headquarters was temporarily moved from Bamako, Mali, to N'Djamena, Chad.¹⁹ Subsequently the Ministers of Defense and Chiefs of Staff reconfigured the force, eliminated the fuseaux, placed the Coordination Headquarters in Niamey, and increased the battalions from seven to 14.

Foreign military interventions: Beyond the FC-G5S, the United States (US) and France have a military presence in the Tillabéri region of Niger through bilateral military agreements. The US has been providing assistance to Niger as part of the Pan-Sahel Initiative, which includes the provision of equipment to security forces, periodic training of Nigerien forces, and advising and assisting Nigerien operations.²⁰ Chad, Mali, and Mauritania also benefit from this initiative. In Niger, the US maintains five military sites, including Ouallam in the Tillabéri region.²¹ The presence of US forces—and in particular their former accompanying of Nigerien forces operations—became the focus of attention following the Tongo Tongo attack in 2017 that took the lives of eight soldiers (four Americans and four Nigeriens).²²

France, through its Operation Barkhane, also has troops in the Tillabéri region. Operation Barkhane's role is to provide support to the G5 Sahel armed forces in their fight against armed opposition groups.²³ Following the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane and special task force Takuba²⁴ from Mali, Niger's Parliament voted, in April 2022, in favor of the French presence in Niger.²⁵ This deployment added to the existing presence of French special forces in the country.²⁶ Created in 2009, the Operation Sabre special forces were first deployed to respond to a series of hostage takings and an attack on the French embassy in Mauritania,²⁷ then in Niger and Burkina Faso to defend French interests and intervene in the event of hostage taking.

Banibangou self-defense group: This group of local forces was formed in 2020 by some communities for self-defense against attacks by AOGs. The initiative was part of the recommendations issued by a Comité Union Tillabéri pour la Paix, la Sécurité et la Cohésion Sociale.²⁸ As part of the 18 recommendations, attendees called for the formation of self-defense groups under the command of retired military officials. The implementation of this recommendation started with the formation of a self-defense group in Tchomabangou village, Niger.

Interlocutors told CIVIC that these self-defense groups were present in the Banibangou department and operated in three villages of the Tondikiwindi commune of the Ouallam department—Mogdjougou, Kawra-tchéri and Takoumbate.²⁹ In these three villages, some of the group members hold an identification card and wear a uniform to distinguish themselves during operations. CIVIC was unable to estimate their exact number in the Banibangou and Ouallam departments. In the Tondikiwindi commune, the self-defense group affiliated with the one in Banibangou is called “Batama Gonda koy”.³⁰

Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel): Islamic State Sahel Province was previously also known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In this report, IS Sahel will be used to designate Islamic State Sahel Province and ISGS. On May 13, 2015, members of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), led by Adnane Abou Walid Al-Sahraoui, left the al-Mourabitoun³¹ group, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group (ISIS), and created the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. IS Sahel operates in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and more recently, in West Africa's coastal states. In Niger, it has carried out attacks in North Tillabéri, bordering Mali, and in the Téra department. In this last department, it was eventually chased out by JNIM.³²

Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin, JNIM): Affiliated with al-Qaeda, JNIM is a coalition created in 2017 through the merger of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) Emirate in the Sahara, Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith), al-Mourabitoun (The Sentinels), and Katiba Macina.³³ Ansar Dine is an AOG formed in late 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghali, a former member and leader of the 1990 rebellion in Mali.³⁴ Affiliated to Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina emerged in 2015 in Mali. It is led by Amadou Koufa, an Imam from central Mali. His group is one of the major AOGs active in Mali.³⁵ JNIM operates in parts of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger within the Sahel region and more recently in West Africa's coastal states.³⁶ Its actions have been recorded in the south-west part of the Tillabéri region within the Téra and Torodi departments bordering Burkina Faso.³⁷

In 2014, Mali's security crises began spilling over into the Tillabéri region of Niger. On February 10, 2014, the Nigerien SDF arrested many MUJAO combatants.³⁸ The army thought they were involved in the fight against the Malian SDF and the French Operation Serval in Mali.³⁹ However, most were fighting to protect their community in their longstanding conflict with the Daoussahak community.

Eight months after this arrest, the Tillabéri region experienced its first attack. On October 30, 2014, MUJAO simultaneously attacked the Ouallam prison, the military position in Banibangou, and the National Guard in charge of security at a refugee camp in Mangaizé.⁴⁰ Fifty-eight prisoners escaped and nine SDF members were killed.⁴¹ This attack was aimed at showing MUJAO's ability to lead an insurgency.⁴² The young Nigerien Fulani who were combatants of the MUJAO at that time saw the attack as an expression of their various frustrations accumulated over the years.⁴³

Those frustrations were fueled by two factors. First, the Fulani Toleebe perceived the February 2014 arrest as a sign that they would not be protected by Nigerien authorities in their fight against the Daoussahak community.⁴⁴ Second, the government promised integration of Fulani Toleebe militia members, after their disarmament, into the national army—but this largely did not happen.⁴⁵

While the insurgency has had the largest impact in Niger's Tillabéri region bordering Mali, the border area with Burkina Faso has not been exempt from attacks. From 2016, the counter-terrorism initiatives led by the Malian armed forces, the FC-G5 Sahel and the French Operation Barkhane contributed to pushing the AOGs to search for new fallback areas in Burkina Faso and Niger, among other countries.^{46, 47}

In 2017, AOGs began attacking both the SDF and civilians in Niger's Tillabéri region bordering Burkina Faso, mainly the Téra and Torodi departments. On May 27, 2017, armed men on motorcycles attacked the border post at Pètèl Kolé, not far from the Burkinabe border. They killed two police officers and a civilian, took weapons and ammunition, and set fire to the border post before heading into Mali.⁴⁸ The following year, on September 17, 2018, armed men kidnapped an Italian priest in the town of Makalondi, located in the Torodi department at the border with Burkina Faso.⁴⁹ No group has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping.

As a response to AOG attacks in Tillabéri bordering the Mali and Burkina Faso borders, the SDF were deployed from 2017 in those areas to conduct military operations in order to "chase the AOG members".⁵⁰ The military intervention was jointly conducted by the Niger SDF, the French Operation Barkhane and the Malian armed groups—the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), primarily composed of Daoussahak, and the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA).⁵¹

In response, in March 2017, the government declared a state of emergency in Ouallam, Banibangou, Abala, and Ayorou et Bankilaré (at the Malian border) and in November 2018 extended it to Téra, Torodi and Say (at the Burkinabe border).^{52, 53} The governor of the Tillabéri region also decided to close gas stations, particularly those located on the Makalondi axis, at the border with Burkina Faso.⁵⁴

While the insurgency has had the largest impact in Niger's Tillabéri region bordering Mali, the border area with Burkina Faso has not been exempt from attacks.

However, military responses and restrictive measures did not contain the insecurity and the conflict took a deadlier turn. On December 10, 2019, IS Sahel attacked a Nigerien military base near the town of Inates on the border with Mali, killing more than 70 soldiers.⁵⁵ A month after, on January 9, 2020, IS Sahel carried out another attack against the Chinégodar Nigerien military base, near Mali, killing 89 soldiers. This marked the deadliest attack since the beginning of the insurgency in Niger's Tillabéri region.⁵⁶

With these attacks at the Malian border, Niger's troops partly retreated from the area. From 2021, the Tillabéri region bordering Mali started recording a series of civilian massacres in response to the creation of a self-defense group and the opposition to some IS Sahel-imposed rules such as illegal tax (zakat) collection.⁵⁷ On January 2, 2021, IS Sahel members killed more than 100 people in two villages of the Ouallam department.⁵⁸ A few months later, on March 15, suspected IS Sahel members killed 58 male civilians who were returning from a trade fair in Banibangou.⁵⁹

In 2022, the French Operation Barkhane and the Niger SDF conducted military operations, patrols and civil-military actions in the Tillabéri region to fight the AOGs. The beginning of 2023 recorded a resurgence of IS Sahel activities in Tillabéri. On February 10, 2023, the group killed 17 soldiers and injured 13 in the Banibangou department near the Malian border.⁶⁰ IS Sahel and JNIM continue to conduct economic predatory acts, kidnapping and other abuses against civilians in the Ayorou, Gothèye, Say, Téra and Torodi departments.⁶¹

V. THREATS TO THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN NIGER'S TILLABÉRI REGION

Civilians in Niger have suffered all manner of protection threats, from physical attacks to extortion to kidnapping. As the brief historical case has shown, the intensity and type of threats increased from 2017. In this section, civilian harm described by respondents in this research and supported by other sources includes targeted killings and attacks, abduction and kidnapping, use of IEDs, and the perception of arbitrary arrests of suspected AOG accomplices by the SDF. Other protection threats include theft of civilian goods, illegal tax collection by AOGs (zakat), destruction of civilian property and infrastructure, consequences of state measures, and internal (forced) displacement of populations. Despite suffering from numerous threats, civilians have remained resilient because they have limited or no option.

Despite suffering from numerous threats, civilians have remained resilient because they have limited or no option.

Violence against civilians

Targeted killings and attacks

Targeted killings, sometimes in the form of mass attacks, and physical assaults are forms of violence that cost the lives of unarmed civilians or, at best, leave them with injuries, disabilities, or psychological trauma. These attacks deprive civilians of their right to life, and in many cases, also constitute violations of international humanitarian law.

From January to December 2022, the protection cluster in Niger identified 80 protection incidents in the Tillabéri region classified as targeted killings, assassinations, attacks, and physical assaults.⁶² This represents approximately 22 percent of the protection incidents documented during 2022 in this region.⁶³ A male interviewee in the Ouallam department told CIVIC that he “witnessed attacks by armed bandits in 2021 in the localities of Kobi, Dangazaouni, Tchémoubangou, Zaroumdarey, and Gnarbou-Koira. In Tchémoubangou, they killed 70 civilians”.⁶⁴

According to survivors of AOG attacks interviewed by CIVIC, AOGs came on motorcycles, camels, vehicles, and sometimes on foot to kill civilians. AOGs target local representatives of the state, and customary and religious authorities, and individuals accused of collaboration with the SDF or who denounce them.⁶⁵ For instance, marabouts,⁶⁶ imams, and village chiefs have been executed in front of their communities. Civilians or villagers who oppose or resist the rules dictated by the groups are also targeted and physically assaulted. A chief canton we met in Ouallam told CIVIC that “the elements of the armed group demand zakat (money you are supposed to pay based on the size of your cattle) on a given date or ask you to leave the village, and anyone who doesn’t do so knows they’ll be killed or assaulted”.⁶⁷

These targeted killings are sometimes followed by the extortion of victims’ goods and destruction of civilian property. The same male interviewee in Ouallam who witnessed attacks in 2021 added that: “In Zaroumdarey, 30 civilians were killed during the night and their granary was set on fire. In Kobi,



Bakary Diouara

The triborder region of the Sahel

AOGs killed five people and took away 87 cows.”⁶⁸ Those mass attacks in the Tillabéri region have been the deadliest. In Zaroumdarey and Tchémoubangou, on January 2, 2021, over 100 civilians were killed. In Darey Dey on March 16, 2021, 64 people died.⁶⁹

The aim of targeted killings or collective punishment is mainly to repress any form of collaboration with the SDF, specifically providing information or alerting them to AOG presence. Something as simple as the passage of SDF through a village has also exposed civilians to reprisal actions from AOGs, which suggests the SDF need to conduct a thorough analysis of risks to civilians related to patrols or visible engagement with civilians in such areas.

A soldier who has conducted several patrols in northern Tillabéri told CIVIC that “no denunciation during patrols were done because when we leave, they [the people] will be killed”.⁷⁰

Separately, civilians also suffer from other non-state armed actors. Civilians, local authorities, SDF and several humanitarian organizations interviewed for this research all said the Banibangou self-defense group perpetrated physical assaults on unarmed civilians. In particular, when the group conducts patrols “to search for members of the Fulani community” accused of collaboration with AOGs, they have murdered, injured, and forcibly displaced civilians.⁷¹

According to a teacher interviewed in Ouallam: “The populations of some villages protect themselves by organizing the youth in the creation of self-defense groups. The problem is that the self-defense groups in other villages are also causing harm to civilians. They try to sustain themselves with the activities of the self-defense group. They take away the property of the people of other villages by using the weapons they have. They are looking for the Fulani to kill them.”⁷²

This targeting of some civilians by the Banibangou self-defense group is also rooted in longstanding local conflicts between the pastoralist Fulani community and the farming Zarma community which make up the majority in the group. Self-defense group members reportedly take advantage of their status and the means at their disposal to settle scores or commit acts of retaliation.⁷³

Abductions and kidnappings

Abductions and kidnappings of civilians are widespread in conflict-affected areas of Niger. In 2021, 311 abduction cases were recorded by the National Human Rights Commission (Commission Nationale des Droits Humains du Niger, CNDH).⁷⁴ The Tillabéri region recorded 21 cases of kidnapping in 2022.⁷⁵ According to data collected, AOGs are the main perpetrators, followed by armed bandits. As described above on the extortion of goods, armed bandits take advantage of the insecurity to kidnap for ransom⁷⁶ while AOGs’ reasons for doing so are more varied.

In some cases civilians are released or abductees find a way to escape,⁷⁷ but in worst-case scenarios they are executed, sometimes in front of their villages.⁷⁸ Survivors of abductions, and their relatives, met by CIVIC did not always know why they were abducted.⁷⁹ Others did not wish to talk about it. However, there are some indicators that suggest the rationale. Abductions generally target wealthy individuals, government officials, local authorities, former self-defense group members, and community leaders. A former self-defense group member in Tillabéri said: “They kidnapped me for four days because I was a former self-defense [group member]. Their leader refused to let me be killed. They beat me very badly. Eventually, I was able to escape to a hospital to receive treatment.”⁸⁰

AOGs also abduct civilians who oppose their rules or practices or the imposition of their governance,⁸¹ or who are connected to those they perceive to have supported the SDF.⁸² Abductions by AOGs is also a strategy to terrorize civilians and instill fear in communities, leading to displacement. Aman, a civilian in Torodi, said: “One day, they kidnapped me. Then they gathered the whole village. They brought back a young man they kept for days. They shot him in front of the whole village. They finally asked for the departure of all the inhabitants.”⁸³

Improvised explosive devices (IEDs)

The use of IEDs by AOGs and explosive remnants of war pose serious threats to civilians in the Tillabéri region. Of note, this is a relatively new protection threat that emerged as the AOGs began targeting the SDF by planting IEDs.⁸⁴ Data collected from the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) in Niger revealed 26 IED explosions for the period of January 1 to August 31, 2022, resulting in 45 casualties, nine of which were civilians.⁸⁵ According to exchanges with UNMAS, civilian casualties as a result of IEDs decreased in 2022 compared to 2021. Disaggregated data on gender is not available to assess the exact profile of the civilian victims. Between 2021 and 2022, the main roads and localities where IEDs have been laid are Torodi-Makalondi, Bossey-Bangou, Gotheye-Téra, and Tillabéri-Ayorou.⁸⁶

Owing to the recent introduction of IEDs in the region, civilians do not have the knowledge to identify and avoid them, according to UNMAS interlocutors.⁸⁷ UNMAS is working with local organizations in Niger to conduct awareness sessions in order to reduce civilian casualties resulting from IEDs and explosive remnants of war. The presence of IEDs on roadways also limits the movement of drivers

and populations, and the delivery of goods to weekly markets.⁸⁸ Such situations have contributed to the slowing of economic activities, the reduction of household livelihoods, famine, the isolation of certain areas, and in most cases, displacement to more secure areas.

Perception of arbitrary arrests of suspected AOG accomplices by the SDF

Civilians believe that some suspected AOG accomplices are innocent. They also complained that some individuals were arrested without their parents being given a reason. A woman in Ouallam told CIVIC that “The SDF must distinguish between bandits and innocents. It’s been a month now since my husband was arrested in Torodi and put in prison. I have no news and I know nothing.”⁸⁹ These acts were committed during military patrols or operations to search for members of AOGs or their collaborators.⁹⁰ A soldier CIVIC interviewed acknowledged that civilians could be killed or injured by accident during military operations.⁹¹ However, the soldier told CIVIC that they minimized those damages as much as possible in their operations.⁹²

Some members of the Gendarmerie and National Guard deployed during operations described some efforts to mitigate harm to civilians.⁹³ These include localizing, identifying, and reassuring the civilian population. The SDF also conduct patrols to identify potential military targets before launching assaults. A security forces member said they “attempt to keep civilians away from areas of operation, rescue them in case of harm and communicate to their leadership about the casualties”. Another security forces member said they “conduct assault in areas where AOGs are”.

Despite the efforts put in place by the SDF, there are still cases of international humanitarian law violations and civilian casualties reported by civilians. In 2020, the CNDH investigated a report on missing civilians in Ayorou. The mission revealed that at least 71 unarmed civilians in the commune of Inates in the department of Ayorou were summarily executed between April 27 and May 2, 2020, by Niger’s SDF.⁹⁴ A man in Torodi who lost two brothers and saw his son arrested reported that: “The SDF killed two of my brothers and took my teenage son to prison. They burned several houses and granaries. By chance, I was in the field when the army burst into the village.”⁹⁵

According to interviewees, arrestees are often civilians who have remained in insecure areas despite the displacement of some community members and a deteriorating security environment.⁹⁶ Interlocutors believe the SDF consider them to be collaborating with AOGs because they have chosen to remain in insecure areas.⁹⁷ Needless to say, the SDF have a legal obligation to consider and treat these civilians as non-armed unless they are directly participating in hostilities.

The reluctance of civilians in these areas to collaborate or share information with the SDF often reinforces the belief by SDF personnel that the population supports the AOGs.⁹⁸ However, the reality is quite different. Some civilians remain in conflict zones despite the deteriorating security situation because they believe they would be more vulnerable in IDP sites than in their home areas.⁹⁹ They prefer to respect the rules of the armed actors controlling the area and carry out their “normal” daily activities while maintaining access to the stability of their homes, personal belongings, and livelihoods.¹⁰⁰

A security forces member said they “attempt to keep civilians away from areas of operation, rescue them in case of harm and communicate to their leadership about the casualties”.

In this case, not sharing information (not collaborating) with the SDF is part of a civilian strategy to survive in the locality, as engagement with the SDF is likely to bring retaliation from AOGs.¹⁰¹ Civilians also told CIVIC that AOGs imposed dress codes on them, such as wearing cut-off pants for men and the hijab for women.¹⁰² Men are also required to grow beards.¹⁰³ Civilians follow these rules to protect themselves from harm perpetrated by the AOGs, but they believe that doing so exposes them to additional suspicion and targeting by the SDF, who see these as evidence that community members support AOGs.¹⁰⁴ Civilians thus find themselves caught between the rules dictated by the armed groups and the need to maintain good relations with the SDF responsible for their protection.

Civilians have also reported the arrest of herders at markets without reason, and during SDF patrols in rural areas. A man in Ouallam told CIVIC researchers: “I witnessed the arrests of nine herders by the SDF. It was a Wednesday evening on the market day of Ouallam in 2020. The SDF took five herders—two Tuaregs and three Fulani—from a house of a herder. They also took four Fulani from the market. The reasons for the arrests were not given.”¹⁰⁵

Sometimes these arrests are based on false denunciations from other community members that are insufficiently investigated. False denunciations are motivated by personal conflicts and community-based rivalries. According to one civilian: “I have witnessed the arrest of several herders. Last year, two herders were arrested by the SDF even though they were not accomplices of the terrorists but rather simple herders.”¹⁰⁶ Other civilians reported that some SDF and community members considered herders suspicious because most of them were Fulani.¹⁰⁷ Also, they move with their herds to the bush where AOGs stay.¹⁰⁸ During operations, AOGs speak the same language as the Fulani community.¹⁰⁹ All of these are correlations, and while it may be the case that some Fulani are AOG members, this doesn’t mean that all, or even most, are.

Civilians also reported that some had been stopped and arrested when patrols saw traces of two-wheeled motorcycles in village houses during the period this means of transport was prohibited.¹¹⁰ Likewise, community members have been arrested for failing to report to the SDF when suspected AOG elements pass through their areas.¹¹¹

Violence or detentions committed by the SDF against the population during their operations and activities have further eroded the bond of trust between civilians and the SDF. From civilian perspectives, these acts strengthen their feeling of being caught between armed opposition groups that pose a threat to their protection and the SDF that are meant to protect them. This leaves many with only the least worst option to protect themselves.

Other protection threats

Theft of civilian goods

Theft of civilian goods comprises one of the most important protection threats since the beginning of the Tillabéri conflict. The majority of victims met by CIVIC claim to have had their goods stolen. The victims accused all the non-state armed groups—the AOGs, the opportunistic armed bandits, and some members of the Banibangou self-defense group.¹¹²

According to respondents, after assaulting or intimidating civilians, the AOGs mainly take civilians’ cattle—which is critical to protection because the livelihood of pastoralists in these areas is tied to livestock. The cattle taken by the AOGs are transported to unknown destinations.¹¹³ A farmer in Ouallam described what happened in his village: “Around 4pm the gunmen came into our village on motorcycles. They split into small groups. Some attacked us and burned the granaries. The others took our livestock. That day, they killed three civilians among us.”¹¹⁴ In areas like Abala and Ouallam,

civilians reported that the AOGs also took their goods, for example agricultural harvests, cellphones and motorcycles, among others.

While bandits take advantage of the security situation to steal money and goods from civilians on the road or in their villages, the Banibangou self-defense group, under the pretext of fighting Tuareg community members or herders they consider AOG associates, take their goods and livestock.^{115, 116} A herder in Abala said: “Some members of the Banibangou self-defense group came to take away our livestock after the gunmen (AOGs) asked us to leave the area.”¹¹⁷

Theft has economic and social consequences for populations. It affects the income-generating activities of households and deprives people of their food supplies. In the departments of Abala, Ouallam, Téra, and Torodi, where the research was conducted, communities told CIVIC that these practices had contributed to famine.¹¹⁸ The impact on the economy and the limited options to conduct income-generating activities have driven men to the countryside.¹¹⁹ Here they can search for economic opportunities with less risk of being targeted,¹²⁰ and generate revenues that enable them to take care of their families who have remained in conflict-affected areas. However, this forced rural exodus leads to the separation of families, accentuates the vulnerability of individuals, and exposes them to new protection risks.

As to why armed actors conduct theft from civilians, community members said it was for the generation of economic as well as logistical resources.¹²¹

Illegal tax collection (zakat)

Illegal tax collection, also known as zakat or tithe, is an act of extortion that became widespread in the Sahel with the emergence of the conflict related to the activities of AOGs. AOGs force the livestock owners to pay the zakat in exchange for protection.¹²² A woman from the Ouallam department said: “The insecurity started in Tondikiwindi through the collection of zakat.”¹²³ Again, owing to the criticality of livestock to the livelihoods of pastoralists in the region, these acts bear serious implications for the protection of civilians.

Some interlocutors said that according to Islam, zakat was meant to be paid once a year for charity. However, since the emergence of AOGs in Tillabéri, the practice has been further adapted. JNIM and IS Sahel force the payment of this tax on household heads or entire villages according to a calculation of the number of livestock in an area. A health worker in Abala told CIVIC: “One day, I was visited by armed men. They were tax collectors. They had just collected sums between 30 000 XOF and 1 500 000 XOF in villages.”¹²⁴

According to many respondents, this tax can be collected several times a year or, in some areas, annually. The frequency and process of taxation depends on the group—JNIM or IS Sahel. A local leader from Ouallam told CIVIC: “When individuals refused to pay the zakat, AOG members confiscated their entire livestock or property. Sometimes opposing the payment of this tax can even lead to a person being killed.”¹²⁵ The practice of illegal taxation deprives people of their property and resources and creates a climate of fear within communities.

Increasingly, AOG members act independently and opportunistically to impose their own zakat on civilians beyond the annual or bi-annual zakat that the larger AOG groups forcibly collect. There have even been isolated cases of individuals who do not belong to armed opposition groups, but rather gangs, and reportedly take advantage of the insecurity to collect zakat from the population.¹²⁶ Such cases occurred in 2022 in the department of Torodi.

Destruction of civilian property

The destruction of civilian property and local government infrastructure is another type of protection threat documented during the research. According to several sources, if AOGs have burned granaries, houses, food and other storage buildings, health and training centers, classrooms, town halls, and telephone stations, the SDF are accused of damaging granaries and crop fields.¹²⁷ Overall, however, civilians felt that AOGs intentionally targeted civilian property more often than the SDF did.

When these buildings are burned, civilians lose not only food stocks from their harvests, which they need for survival, but also their personal belongings and the money stored in their homes. A civilian in Ouallam whose property was destroyed by AOGs said: “The AOGs set fire to our granaries and we lost our animals. Our houses were burned and we lost money as well as bags of food inside.”¹²⁸ Civilian houses and granaries are burned mostly to punish the population or get them to move or empty the village.¹²⁹

AOGs destroy civilian properties for many reasons. The destruction of schools is to express their opposition to Western education. Fears arising from these attacks, particularly the targeting of classrooms and teachers, have also prompted the closure of additional schools. As of December 31, 2022, the Niger Education Cluster recorded 809 primary and secondary schools closed in the Tillabéri region.¹³⁰ The departments of Téra and Torodi were the most affected by these closures in late 2022, with 26 percent and 19 percent of their primary and secondary schools shut, respectively.¹³¹ The closure of schools due to insecurity means children are deprived of an education, no longer enjoy their rights, and cannot reach their full potential.

AOGs sometimes target state infrastructure in an effort to undermine the government, but in the process affect civilians.¹³² For example, they may target telephone stations and local government buildings—both of which are services that civilians depend upon.

The SDF also sometimes destroy civilian properties during regular military operations. In their search for AOG members, or during patrols, or based on information received, they burn houses or granaries assuming that insurgents are hiding in them. A civilian in Torodi said: “One day, SDF passing through my village set fire to my granary full of sorghum. They thought terrorists were hiding there, according to informants.”¹³³

Consequences of state measures

Some state measures meant to curb insecurity have unintentionally worsened existing protection threats. In March 2017, the national authorities decreed a state of emergency in five Tillabéri region departments.¹³⁴ This decree was then renewed mainly in departments at the borders with Burkina Faso and Mali, and those most affected by the insecurity.¹³⁵ Subsequently, the state decided to restrict mobility, limiting the use of two-wheeled vehicles and closing certain weekly markets.¹³⁶ Authorities justified these decisions with the need to better control the territory, facilitate the conduct of military operations, and protect civilians.¹³⁷

The 2020 humanitarian needs assessment by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs revealed several consequences of these measures, including a slowdown of economic activity and a loss of livelihoods and incomes for many Nigeriens.¹³⁸ Insecurity, coupled with the adverse effects of the state of emergency measures, has made it difficult for the population, and those in need, to access hospitals.

Civilians told CIVIC that they were victimized by both AOG and SDF actions, and by the measures imposed by the authorities. They feel the authorities should propose alternatives. A military official interviewed by CIVIC agreed that alternatives should be provided: “State of emergency measures are perceived as a step backwards for us [SDF] who have worked to gain the trust and collaboration of the people [in the field].”¹³⁹ The interlocutor added that sometimes these measures had been taken without consulting the actors on the ground who were fighting in the conflict.¹⁴⁰ This undermined efforts to strengthen collaboration between the SDF and the population, which in turn was crucial for effective security responses.

Internal (forced) displacement of populations

While civilians sometimes flee their homes because of attacks, or as a preventive strategy in anticipation of violence, in other cases AOGs force populations to evacuate villages under the threat of being killed.¹⁴¹ During the months of November and December 2022, for example, 9 449 people (1 711 households) were forcibly displaced to the commune of Téra.¹⁴² These people came from over 10 villages in the communes of Bankilaré and Kokorou.¹⁴³ This form of violence was attributed exclusively to AOGs, who forcibly displaced civilians through incursions, targeted killings, mass attacks, or by giving them an ultimatum to leave the areas.¹⁴⁴

An IDP woman in Abala described to CIVIC how AOGs forced them to move. “Our village in Abala was attacked [one] early morning [in] 2021 by a group of armed men on motorcycles. They started shooting at everyone: men, women, and children. They shot my husband and his aunt in front of me. I was pregnant with the twins you see there. I was in my seventh month and the man who was going to kill me spared me because of my advanced pregnancy. That day they slaughtered more than half of our village. That’s when we fled and came here as [IDPs] in Abala.”¹⁴⁵ On October 20 and November 8, 2022, in the department of Bankilaré and the border areas of Burkina Faso, several AOG attacks accompanied by ultimatums to civilians led many people to flee to the main town in the area.¹⁴⁶

When AOGs force people to displace, civilians flee on foot, by cart, by donkey, or at best, by vehicle.¹⁴⁷ Some civilians told CIVIC it could take days for them to reach safer locations and that some people died while fleeing because of hardships on the journey.¹⁴⁸ A representative of the chief of a village, also displaced, said: “The armed men set fire to houses, which caused the displacement of the population. Some left on foot, others in carts or vehicles. The journey took two days for some. Two children even lost their lives along the way.”¹⁴⁹ Moreover, when people leave their homes, they lose access to many of the resources and networks that help sustain their livelihoods, survival, and emotional wellbeing.

Civilian experiences indicate that the AOGs’ strategic aim is to force populations who are not sympathetic to their cause and who could collaborate with the SDF to leave their homes.¹⁵⁰ Their strategy is also to better control areas with the least chance of resistance from community members who have power and authority and can fight.¹⁵¹ Sometimes AOGs target or give ultimatums to individuals such as wealthy community members or opinion leaders who can lead an opposition to their presence and action.¹⁵²

V.

CIVILIANS' PERSPECTIVES ON OPPORTUNITIES TO ADDRESS GAPS IN EXISTING PROTECTION EFFORTS

In the context of threats to civilian life and livelihoods, state, SDF and humanitarian actors and civilians themselves have implemented initiatives to address the insecurity. The nature of responses put in place and their outcomes demonstrate the resilience of the population despite the traumatic experiences they live through every day. The data collected reveals their perspectives on ways to address gaps in existing protection efforts.

Such feedback from the population's lived experience is important in order to guide the future of protection in the region. It provides an opportunity to document positive aspects of the numerous interventions, sometimes seemingly insignificant in the face of growing challenges. On the other hand, lessons learned and limits should be seen as pragmatic actions that could improve the protection of civilians even on a small scale, despite the continued insecurity in Tillabéri.

Limits and negative effects on civilians of some military and political responses to insecurity

Civilians interviewed in the Tillabéri region said the national authorities had made efforts to address the deteriorating security situation. They noted in particular the sacrifices made by the SDF to protect civilians. For example, a civilian in the Abala department acknowledged that "the SDF protect civilians to the ultimate sacrifice by dying on the battlefield".¹⁵³ However, respondents also identified political and military responses that negatively impacted civilians. These responses included recruitment and force generation, creation of military bases and positions, monitoring of the state emergency, and civilian-military engagement.

Force generation

Among actions undertaken by the military to improve security, interviewees cited the military operations that had taken place since at least 2015 and 2016 in the northern part of Tillabéri and the Téra and Torodi departments.¹⁵⁴ In 2022, there were SDF patrols and presence in all the 13 departments of these regions.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, while the population considers these developments beneficial, they haven't resolved the insecurity issues. In addition, civilians told CIVIC that the military didn't regularly patrol remote areas and villages where insecurity had become worse and where AOGs were present.¹⁵⁶

On the state side, Niger plans to increase SDF personnel from 33 000 to 50 000 by 2025 and 100 000 by 2030.^{157, 158} The strategy is to recruit young people from conflict-affected areas, and train and deploy them in their locality of origin. This will help build the gaps in terms of human resources

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on the ground. An interlocutor told CIVIC: “Niger has about 35 000 police and Gendarmerie officers only, which is very low [for] the size of the country. It will not help ensure good coverage of the vast territory.”¹⁵⁹

According to the authorities, recruiting those young people would also help build trust between the SDF and civilian population, since those recruited would understand the local language, customs and habits of the area.¹⁶⁰ However, such a strategy could also expose the family of newly recruited SDF personnel who live in the conflict-affected areas to reprisal attacks.

The police are putting in place combat units that will contribute to the fight against terrorism and secure civilians. The police will also increase the number of Multipurpose Squadrons,¹⁶¹ Rapid Action Surveillance and Intervention Groups,¹⁶² and Police Mobile Border Control Companies¹⁶³ in the Tillabéri region. According to the authorities, those units will contribute to the control of the remote areas and respond more quickly and effectively to the alerts given by the populations in order to protect them.¹⁶⁴ This increase in recruitment would have to be accompanied by an equal effort to understand and train the military on protection issues.

Military bases and positions

The military operations in northern Tillabéri and the Téra and Torodi departments have been accompanied by the presence of the SDF in certain localities through military bases and positions. However, civilians say the absence of the SDF in conflict-affected areas means that people are exposed to the rules and abuses of AOGs. Also, when the SDF conducts patrols and leaves the population without protection, civilians who have collaborated could face reprisals from AOGs.

A teacher in Téra told CIVIC: “We need a permanent presence of the military to protect us from jihadists. [SDF] presence deters them and slows down their actions.”¹⁶⁵ Several SDF members in conflict-affected areas also confirmed that there was a need to increase the military’s force through recruitment and establish bases or camps in areas that require additional resources to protect civilians.¹⁶⁶ One SDF member said: “To improve protection of civilians, military camps should be created in risk areas, soldiers should be recruited, and we should maintain a permanent presence in the conflict-affected areas.”¹⁶⁷

Civilians offered thoughts on which at-risk areas they believed military camps could help protect.¹⁶⁸ These included borders with Burkina Faso and areas such as Boupo, Bangarey, Gabane and Diagorou in the Téra department. Takoumbate in the Ouallam department, where community conflicts, the Banibangou militia, and AOGs coexist, was also cited. Among local authorities CIVIC met, some emphasized the need for military camps in border areas with Burkina Faso and Mali in order to prevent the incursion of AOGs in Niger territory.¹⁶⁹

Monitoring the state of emergency

As detailed above, the mobility restrictions and other measures put in place by the Nigerien authorities as part of the declared state of emergency have created more protection threats than they have resolved. NGO representatives interviewed suggested that additional troops should also help facilitate critical civilian movements, such as to hospitals.¹⁷⁰ SDF support to critical civilian movements could help mitigate the negative impacts of these measures.¹⁷¹ The authorities should also conduct regular assessments of the implementation of the state of emergency, such as the one done by the National Center for Strategic and Security Studies¹⁷² for the national authorities, to better adapt it as the volatile security context changes.

Civilian-military engagement

The presence through bases and camps, where useful, and the increase of the number of SDF in Niger is unlikely to address civilian protection concerns unless the nature of the engagement between the militaries and the communities also changes. When CIVIC asked the civilian population and SDF about the nature of their relationship and if there was frequent dialogue between them, the responses were mixed.

Most thought this relationship was not easy and was characterized by mistrust on both sides.¹⁷³ Civilians also have the perception that the SDF commit abuses and are more concerned with civilians respecting the rules than they are with understanding the security context or the population's concerns.

Civilians from the Fulani community, in particular, had some of the lowest opinions of the SDF. A reason could be that they feel the most targeted by the SDF and other community members who accuse them of being AOG accomplices, as in the case in Abala or Banibangou, for example.¹⁷⁴ Civilians from the Ouallam department had more positive views overall, and told CIVIC that the relationship with the SDF had improved because of their good behavior and the actions they had taken to protect civilians.¹⁷⁵ However, even stakeholders from Ouallam believed there was still work to be done to strengthen engagement between civilians and the SDF.

To improve this fragile relationship and dialogue, civilians and the SDF suggest building and maintaining a mutual trust. They also suggest the systematic introduction of the military when they come into operations, better involvement of the population, and dialogues to discuss the protection of civilians and incidents of harm involving the SDF.¹⁷⁶ However, the SDF should consider the danger of retaliation from AOGs and should only proceed if communities feel the benefits outweigh the risks, based on the local conflict dynamics.

The main aim of any civilian-military dialogue should be protection. Most civilian respondents noted that the SDF entered into dialogue with communities to extract information rather than to discuss how the army operation could protect civilians and prevent any harm from AOGs.¹⁷⁷ The dialogue should also be done in areas where there is less civil-military engagement, such as the Torodi department.¹⁷⁸ Awareness-raising efforts to explain the mission of the deployed forces, the behaviors that civilians should adopt, the validity of curfew measures and other harmful restrictions put in place, and the need to inform the SDF, should be intensified.¹⁷⁹

Besides the need for more and better dialogue, civilians' desire to inform the SDF is threatened by the lack of a rapid response to the alert given. This observation was made by several civilians and even local authorities.¹⁸⁰ Giving an alert in these insecure areas is an action that carries huge risks for civilians. Sometimes the channels for passing information are not always secure and expose the civilian reporting it.¹⁸¹ Civilians and customary leaders have found ways to pass on information indirectly. For example, civilians told CIVIC that they preferred to inform the village chief or local leaders in the area who then informed the SDF.¹⁸² However, the lack of response or late intervention undermines the impetus of the population to share alerts with the SDF and makes them AOG targets.¹⁸³

Local peace committees and challenges that limit their effectiveness

The High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix, or HACP)¹⁸⁴ established local peace committees on behalf of the state. Non-state organizations, with

the support of technical and financial partners, have set up similar committees. The committees have different names, such as citizen watch committees or protection committees, and exist at the departmental and communal levels.

The committees are composed of representatives of local communities and authorities. The main objective of these platforms is to allow communities to share their concerns and needs using traditional conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms. Such mechanisms include mediation, dialogue, and negotiation.¹⁸⁵

While these consultation frameworks have contributed to community commitment to social cohesion and peace, some operational challenges exist and limit their effectiveness.¹⁸⁶ Participants at the data validation workshop raised the issue of sustainability of such mechanisms.¹⁸⁷ Once set up, most committee members are not active.

The security context, which has also induced mistrust and a climate of fear, makes it more difficult for these committees to function.¹⁸⁸ During committee meetings, there is a reluctance and mistrust to share information on the security situation to avoid reprisals from AOGs. Moreover, committees in major towns of the communes sometimes make decisions that are too risky to implement in the smaller localities.¹⁸⁹ The worsening of the security situation and the capacity of AOGs to be informed about events in the villages make committee members afraid to act. This also contributes to the reluctance of civilians to join certain initiatives at the risk of being punished by the groups.¹⁹⁰ The primary role of the committees put in place should not be to alert. This exposes them. It should first contribute to the protection of civilians and addressing civilian challenges to have access to basic social services.

The local peace committee can still contribute to resolving longstanding community conflicts that fuel the current insecurity. But the mistrust among communities and even individuals does not facilitate the conduct of the committee's actions, especially in remote areas. There is a need to integrate those committees' resolutions of community conflicts into a larger approach that combines military and political interventions. Villages and civilians should be secured before mediation or dialogue actions for social cohesion occur.

Protection and assistance efforts to populations in need

Humanitarian assistance in the region mainly involves assistance to populations affected by insecurity, internally displaced persons, and refugees.

IDPs in the Tillabéri region told CIVIC that they received food kits, financial assistance, shelter, tarps, and mats from NGOs. Water points had also been erected.¹⁹¹ Some civilians who had experienced trauma received psychosocial support.¹⁹² However, such resources remain insufficient to meet the growing needs of the displaced population.¹⁹³

According to national authorities, IDPs, and NGOs, additional efforts must be made to better manage displaced people. These actions should include national authorities sensitizing local representatives, ministerial and local-level technical services, and partners, to ensure effective compliance with law 2018-74¹⁹⁴ on the protection and assistance of IDPs. National authorities should also provide resources to implement this law at a local level. Such action would help improve the protection that local authorities provide to IDPs.

Humanitarian actors and some SDF members told CIVIC that there were multiple IDP sites in the region. They said the fact that IDPs were scattered over several different sites hampered their assistance and security.¹⁹⁵ To address those operational and security challenges, they suggest that local authorities explore the option to group them.¹⁹⁶ Having IDPs grouped (or not) presents some advantages and drawbacks that have to be identified before decisions can be made. Such decisions should aim to give IDPs the option to choose where and how they want to live.

In addition to the systematic efforts to provide IDPs with shelter, and to organize and protect their sites where this is the preferred option of the displaced persons, it is important to improve the approach to humanitarian assistance. Niger's Ministry of Humanitarian Action and Disaster Management recommends a humanitarian-development-peace nexus.¹⁹⁷ The objective is to find a sustainable solution to the return of IDPs by ensuring security and infrastructure. IDPs told CIVIC that they wanted "security to be ensured in their place of origin through the permanent presence of security forces to enable them to return there".¹⁹⁸

Benefits of self-protection options and where they may fall short

Following or engaging with AOGs

Local communities have set up mechanisms to protect themselves in the face of harm from AOGs and other armed actors, some of which are individual and organic, and others that are more organized. According to local communities, these initiatives are needed because of the limitations of security responses.¹⁹⁹ In the absence of a permanent security presence, communities have had to take charge of their own security.²⁰⁰ The mechanisms described by the interviewees reveal the limited options they have.

Civilians follow rules imposed by the AOGs to protect themselves from attack.²⁰¹ These rules include not interfering in the conflict between the AOGs and the SDF by not sharing information with the military, limiting their movement, and adopting dress codes and behavioral norms imposed by the insurgents.²⁰² Some civilian respondents believe that following these rules does not fully protect them from AOG attacks, but nevertheless reduces risks.²⁰³

Dialogues and negotiations can also be used to protect civilians. People living in areas where AOGs operate conduct dialogues and negotiations with insurgents to protect themselves when possible.²⁰⁴ The idea behind the approach taken by the local communities is to be able to survive, carry out their activities, and not have to leave their home areas.²⁰⁵ The populations believe this is effective.

In some localities of the Abala and Torodi departments, this approach has allowed some of the population to remain in their zones.²⁰⁶ On the other hand, by remaining in these areas, the populations lose access to state services, which authorities stop delivering because of insecurity. Based on the experience of local communities, they believe that state authorities should make additional efforts to engage in political dialogue with the AOGs to pacify the insecure areas.²⁰⁷ Local actors who have experience engaging with AOGs or supporting communities to engage with AOGs could help with these efforts.

Benefits and risks of Banibangou self-defense group

The creation of the Banibangou self-defense group is one of the main protection mechanisms put in place by communities.²⁰⁸ Indeed, the youth of certain localities in the departments of Banibangou and Ouallam have organized themselves through this self-defense group. They stand guard and protect their community members from the predatory actions of the AOGs.

Members of the Banibangou self-defense group told CIVIC that they operated in villages where the army could not reach.²⁰⁹ Interviewees said the group had adopted some measures to avoid inadvertently harming unarmed civilians during its operations,²¹⁰ including by warning the population and asking them to hide during the fighting.²¹¹ Another strategy for sparing civilians is to meet the AOG at the entrance to villages to avoid engaging in hostilities in areas where civilians are living and could be inadvertently wounded or killed.²¹² As for the means available to the self-defense group to operate, some say the members have small arms and light weapons provided by local authorities.²¹³ Some self-defense group members said they did not have the means to fight and defend themselves except with arrows, sticks, and dabas.^{214, 215}

Although self-defense groups can defend communities in which they operate, this strategy is not without adverse consequences.²¹⁶ A number of the people CIVIC interviewed, including local authorities, accused them of committing abuses against civilians.

There have been isolated cases of attacks and theft of livestock in the departments of Ouallam and Abala. Self-defense group members observed that cases of abuse occurred because of their lack of adequate resources. They expressed the need for additional resources in the form of weapons and communication, such as hand-held radios,²¹⁷ food, transport, and salaries or stipends. The abuses allow self-defense group members to generate financial resources and obtain operational means, but they worsen the situation for civilians.

IV. CONCLUSION

Nearly a decade of insecurity and conflict in the Tillabéri region threatens the population's future. On the one hand, AOGs and armed bandits conduct predatory acts to deprive the population of their resources, take their lives, and destabilize the economic, political, educational, and health systems. On the other, SDF actions and other state measures, while intended to combat insecurity and protect civilians, sometimes create new protection concerns for the population. After setting up a self-defense group to protect themselves, civilians have sometimes fallen victim to the abuses of the very groups intended for protection. Civilians living in the Tillabéri region thus have to deal with both their tormentors and protectors.

Protection mechanisms put in place by national authorities, humanitarian actors, and civilians themselves face challenges that limit their effectiveness. Better protection of civilians in the Tillabéri region also requires the Nigerien government and the SDF to proactively prevent and address the harm caused to civilians by the AOGs, the Banibangou self-defense group, and armed bandits. It also implies that the SDF members deployed in the villages and localities should implement initiatives to mitigate harm to civilians arising from their presence, activities, and operations.

Beyond military actions, the Nigerien government should ensure that restrictive measures put in place as part of the state of emergency do not increase civilians' protection risks. Humanitarian and development actors and the state should also improve protection and assistance efforts for IDPs and host communities while working with security actors to create the conditions for their return to their home areas.

As stipulated in this report, there are pragmatic steps that can incrementally improve the protection of civilian experience. By implementing them, the Nigerien government and its partners will ensure the effective delivery of a key state function—the protection of its people—and enable civilians to begin to experience an improvement in their situation despite the continued insecurity in the Tillabéri region and its neighboring areas.

ENDNOTES

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