

Niger: COVID-19 and violent extremism –
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The first registered case of COVID-19 was discovered on March 19, 2020. Government has taken preventive action with social distancing measures and strengthened its communication with leaders of the various religious denominations. The government has also set up an inter-ministerial committee to manage the crisis with a national solidarity fund created to purchase protective equipment.

Certain measures cause discontent or even the rejection of a segment of the population from the beginning. While Nigeriens seem to live with most of the restrictions, those related to the closure of mosques and the suspension of collective prayers fuel discontent. Violent demonstrations took place in several localities to denounce these measures, which some consider contrary to the Islamic doctrine.

If the Islamic Council of Niger - supposed to represent the main Muslim authorities in the country - supports government decisions, many worshipers oppose them and try to challenge the authorities by continuing to organize collective prayers. In rural areas where the state has less capacity to impose these measures, many mosques have remained open and prayers continue almost normally. In large cities, some worshipers continue to defy the ban by trying to reopen their mosques or by meeting in makeshift places, especially in the suburbs.

In response, the government cracked down on the violators, arresting the imams who conduct these prayers or dispersing the worshipers who take part in them. This repression caused clashes between the faithful and the police. Altercations occur regularly every Friday across the country, and in Niamey, serious violence erupted on 17 April between the police and worshipers.

The regions experiencing violent extremism are the Diffa and Tillabéri regions. In this last region, on May 11, 2020, twenty villagers were killed towards the border with Mali in the middle of RAMADAN by terrorists. The same is true in Diffa, where there is an upsurge in Boko Haram activities. These attacks are not related to COVID-19 because it is not the regions most affected by the disease that are attacked. However, many people are in denial of the disease and think it is a western plot against Islam. The link that we can establish is that we observe a loosening of the hunt for terrorists by the authorities at the highest level, more concerned by the pandemic and the money mobilized with it (pandemic bond) while the terrorist groups and bandits are profiting off the situation to expand their attacks.