



**Joint Learning Initiative
on Faith & Local Communities**
Strengthening Evidence-Based Faith Engagement



Strategies and initiatives focused on youth, interreligious dialogue and prevention of violent extremism in Niger



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Abstract

Niger is a secular country with a Muslim majority. In general, communities live in harmonious peace and cultivate the spirit of living together regardless of ethnic or religious differences. Freedom of worship is a reality in the country. However, in recent decades, the State of Niger has faced the problem of violent extremism, particularly among young people. This phenomenon results from several factors. To deal with this situation while preserving social cohesion and tolerance between the different religious communities, the Government has developed strategies related to freedom of worship and the fight against and prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism. The study sought to explore these strategies and identify existing initiatives and structures within the framework of interfaith dialogue for the prevention of violent extremism with a particular focus on youth involvement. This report on the study presents the essential content of these strategies, as well as the three main structures identified that integrate interreligious dialogue, prevention of violent extremism and youth into their programmes, namely the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP), the National Committee for Intra- and Interreligious Dialogue (CDIR) and the Youth Organisation for Interreligious Dialogue in Niger (OJDI).

1. Introduction

Niger is a vast Sahelian country, recognised as a Muslim state due to its high Muslim population. Although a secular state since its independence in 1960, the only recognised association in Niger for many years was the Islamic Association of Niger. The advent of democracy in the country in 1992 after a long period of military regimes brought important reforms via the Constitution, including freedom of worship. By nature, the people of Niger love peace and cultivate the spirit of living in peace, despite the existence of certain community conflicts, most often between herders and farmers.

Niger's neighbouring countries face multiple conflicts, particularly interethnic and interreligious conflicts. Its geographical location, combined with factors such as unemployment, injustice, ease of access to the media and the liberalisation of the organisational sector, open the country to violent extremism, a situation formerly unknown to the population. The Government has developed strategies for religions and the fight against and prevention of violent extremism. It directs its actions through these strategies to make the country a territory of peace, social cohesion and security.

This report presents the various strategies that the Nigerien State has established within the framework of interreligious dialogue for the prevention of violent extremism and the various governmental and non-governmental initiatives that exist and work in this direction, with a particular focus on the role of youth in these initiatives. The concept of interreligious dialogue, misunderstood by some and misinterpreted by others, has sparked debate among the population. It is therefore desirable, even necessary, for any intervention using this type of dialogue for the prevention of violent extremism, in particular when young people are involved, to understand the position of the State in this field and the existing structures that advocate for such dialogue and the types of activities they carry out.

2. Objective

This study aims to present the place of interreligious dialogue and the prevention of violent extremism on the basis of religious beliefs, in particular through the involvement of young people so that they can be supported in this role of consolidating peace and preserving security in Niger. It specifically aims to document the different strategies adopted by the Nigerien Government in terms of religions and the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism. It also aims to raise awareness of existing initiatives that link interreligious dialogue, the prevention of violent extremism and youth. It is based on the information available in the documents of the institutions and organisations that intervene in the field of peace, security and worship, as well as through interviews conducted with the leaders of these institutions and organisations.

3. Literature review

Niger is a country with a Muslim majority. According to the country's Ministry of Interior and Decentralisation, more than 98% of the population is Muslim. About 95% of Muslims are Sunni, and 5% are Shia. Catholic and Protestant groups make up less than 2% of the population. There are a few thousand members of the Bahá'í Faith who mainly reside in Niamey. A small percentage of the population primarily adheres to indigenous religious beliefs. Some animist practices persist culturally among the Muslim majority, although they have become much less common over the past decade (United States Department of State, 2017).

Since its independence, the country has been governed by Muslim civilian and military leaders who strive to build a secular state while taking into account the numerical importance of the Muslim population (Touati, 2011). However, the advent of democracy in Niger was accompanied by the liberalisation of religious associations. Like other Sahelian countries, Islam in Niger has developed in harmony with the traditions of Africa. Just after the National Conference of 1991, the principle of free association, including in the Islamic field, was not only introduced but materialised through the creation of a certain number of organisations as alternatives to the Islamic Association of Niger, the only recognised association until 1990 (Sounaye, 2011).

Freedom of worship becomes a reality with the Constitution's prohibition of religious discrimination. It also specifies the separation of religion and state as an unalterable principle and stipulates equality under the law for all, regardless of religious affiliation. It provides for freedom of conscience, religion, worship and expression of faith with respect for public order, social peace and national unity (United States Department of State, 2017).

Religions live in harmonious peace in Niger. Catholics and Protestants, who represent just over 5% of the population, are Nigeriens and have many family and friendly ties with their Muslim environment. However, in January 2015, following the publication of a caricature of the Muslim prophet Muhammad by the Charlie Hebdo magazine in France, violent demonstrations caused considerable damage. These demonstrations, which occurred mainly in Zinder and Niamey, targeted the symbols of France and the properties of the ruling party. Bars and places of leisure were ransacked, but, more significantly, churches were burned in antireligious violence. It was the first time the Christian religion had been attacked in a violent, somewhat deadly way (Olivier de Sardan, 2015).

Several sociocultural factors are at the root of this violent extremism, including, among others, the interpretation and distortion of the precepts of religions, ignorance, misunderstanding and intolerance. From then on, the need for interreligious dialogue in Niger proved necessary to prevent violent extremism against a religion. Islamic-Christian dialogue does not aim, like ecumenism between Christian religions, to promote unity or communion in faith. Interreligious dialogue does not aim to share the same Word of God and the same Table of the Lord. The Muslim and Christian faiths remain fundamentally divided on essential points, making it impossible to envisage union (Moctar, 2015).

Young people account for more than 60% of the population, and most of the people responsible for the violence of January 2015 were from this segment of the population. In addition to the factors mentioned above, this can be explained by the disarray felt by many unemployed young people, who, due to their lack of prospects, are sometimes tempted to join the ranks of jihadist groups, such as Boko Haram, which is very active in neighbouring Nigeria. Therefore, any intervention to prevent violent extremism must involve young people in interreligious dialogue. In 2018, Prime Minister Brigi Rafini asserted, "It will be a question of strengthening these youth's mechanisms of dialogue and cultivating mutual understanding, the spirit of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between religions, by educating in the culture of peace" (Le Sahel, 2018). The choice to focus on young people is very important because they are resolutely turned towards religion but are also, for this reason, the most exposed to manipulations of all kinds. Therefore, engaging young people in the dialogue contributes to their protection and training (Le Sahel, 2018).

4. Methodology

This research was designed and conducted over a short period, just three weeks, from 7 to 28 November 2022. The data collection took place simultaneously with the bibliographic research and the interviews.

The open and semi-structured individual interviews were carried out with five participants in charge of the Violent Extremism, Interreligious Dialogue and Youth departments of the three structures identified: HACP, CDIR and OJDI. The participants were interviewed primarily on the basis of their responsibility in these structures and their involvement in activities related to violent extremism, interreligious dialogue and youth within these structures.

The interviews with the leaders of each structure focused on the following:

- The status of the structure
- Its interventions in the areas of intra- and interreligious dialogue and the prevention of violent extremism
- The place and role of young people
- The difficulties the structure is currently encountering

5. Results

5.1 Introduction to the national strategies

The study led us to learn about the two strategies adopted by the Nigerien Government in the areas of worship and the prevention of violent extremism. One of these two strategies, the National Strategy for Religions in Niger, adopted in 2020, mainly focuses on freedom of worship in Niger. The other strategy, the National Strategy for the Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Niger, also adopted in 2020, is part of a dynamic that underpins and directs action towards the deep ambition of a peaceful country where the conditions of individual and collective well-being are put in place and benefit equitably all the communities who live there and sincerely share the feeling of belonging to a unitary country.

5.1.1. National Strategy for Religions in Niger

Niger ensures the free exercise of worship, the peaceful coexistence of religions and the promotion of dialogue within and between religions. According to Law 2019-28 of 1 July 2019, exercise of worship is free in Niger. However, freedom of worship is exercised with respect for public order, good morals, social peace, national unity and the principle of the separation of state and religion. As a result of this law, Niger is secular and recognises the importance of intra- and interreligious dialogue for social coexistence and peace. Therefore, it is against any form of violent extremism that may affect the integrity of freedom of worship.

Recently, with the development of fundamentalist and extremist religious tendencies against the background of a subregional environment marked by the appearance of terrorist organisations claiming to be Islamic, it has become imperative for the country to provide the means for greater control of the practices that take place in the religious sphere. The development of this strategy aims not only to operationalise the constitutional principles of free exercise of worship and respect for public order but also to translate the State's commitment to social peace and national unity into action.

Overall objective

This strategy aims to promote a culture of social cohesion, peace and tolerance, which translates into the prevention of violent extremism.

Specific objectives

Specifically, the National Strategy for Religions in Niger aims to:

- Design and implement a layout plan for places of worship
- Promote quality denominational training
- Promote healthy, educational and tolerant preaching
- Ensure adequate supervision of the exercise of worship
- Strengthen intra- and interreligious dialogue
- Fight against radicalisation and violent extremism

Strategic areas

Three areas related to intra- and interreligious dialogue for the prevention of violent extremism emerge from this strategy:

Area 1: Sermons/Predictions

This focuses on the following:

- Creating training centres for preachers
- Training preachers in specialised centres
- Creating a framework for exchange with the media to make them accountable for the content of the sermons they broadcast
- Creating a monitoring structure for the control and monitoring of sermons
- Supporting all initiatives aimed at preserving and consolidating social peace, in particular awareness campaigns through sermons, citizen initiatives, public authority initiatives, collective preacher sessions, etc.

Area 2: Intra- and interreligious dialogue

Through this area, the State aims to:

- Revitalise the framework of inter- and intrareligious dialogue
- Strengthen the regulatory role of traditional chiefs regarding social tensions
- Create or revitalise frameworks for consultation and regulation of religious activities
- Strengthen the capacities of religious leaders, particularly in the prevention and management of conflicts involving their followers
- Provide material and financial support to *cadis* (judges in Muslim communities)
- Create a framework for intensifying consultation and collaboration between all the actors of denominational schools
- Create a framework for exchange and experience-sharing between preachers and those responsible for places of worship

Area 3: Fight against radicalisation and violent religious extremism

In general, it is a question of establishing a mechanism to fight against religious intolerance and other factors of vulnerability to violent extremism. In detail, this focuses on the following:

- Setting up an information system to fight against religious intolerance and violent extremism at the regional, departmental and community levels
- Organising awareness campaigns to fight against violent extremism and other factors of vulnerability to violent extremism
- Developing a programme that emphasises the teaching of religious values at school (respect for parents, teachers, the elderly, the principles governing the neighbourhood, the rights of others), etc.
- Encouraging collaboration between communities and Defence and Security Forces to fight against terrorism
- Encouraging the organisation of debates to maintain dialogue through the media, including audio and visual, on extremism, terrorism, its causes and dimensions so that the message in this context becomes productive and non-destructive

In short, the National Strategy of Religions in Niger is an important working tool put in place to promote the prevention of and fight against violent extremism and to advocate for intra- and interreligious dialogue for social cohesion and the culture of peace and tolerance between different communities.

5.1.2. National Strategy for the Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Niger

In the context of this study, violent extremism is to be understood as violence towards a community on the basis of their belief in a different deity than the perpetrator of the violence.

The diagnostic analysis made it possible to identify four major priority challenges, which must be addressed by all stakeholders, in order to better prevent radicalisation and violent extremism in Niger (Centre National d'Etudes Stratégiques et de Sécurité, 2020). These challenges are reflected in the strategic axes presented below.

Overall objective

The overall objective of the strategy is to help promote optimal conditions conducive to stability in Niger, the strengthening of lasting social peace and the improvement of human security.

Specific objective

With this in mind, its specific objective is to substantially mitigate the threats and risks related to radicalisation and violent extremism to Niger's stability, social peace and human security. This objective stems from the forward-looking vision of Niger, which establishes strong interrelationships between security and development.

Strategic areas

In order to meet the major priority challenges and achieve the above strategic results, four strategic areas have been retained. They are interrelated and reflect, as a whole, the main strategies for the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism:

Area 1: Mitigation of factors conducive to radicalisation and violent extremism.

This axis is articulated around the following aspects:

- Substantially reducing inciting factors to radicalisation and violent extremism
- Reducing the attractiveness of the offer of violent extremist groups to at-risk or vulnerable populations
- Building the capacity of state and non-state actors to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism

Area 2: Development of an information and knowledge management system for the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

This area implements the following main strategies:

- mapping actors in the collection and production of data and information
- designing and establishing a national observatory on the issues of radicalisation and violent extremism
- building technical, technological and logistical capacities
- collecting, processing and analysing data and producing and disseminating information products
- consulting and exchanging experiences in the production and management of information for the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism
- conducting studies and research on radicalisation and violent extremism within the various sections of Nigerien society and in the Sahelian region and developing a partnership and effective coordination between research structures on radicalisation and violent extremism, nationally, regionally and internationally

Area 3: Development of the resilience of populations in the face of radicalisation and violent extremism.

This axis is articulated around the following strategies:

- strengthening social mobilisation, in particular, community leaders (religious leaders and traditional leaders), young people and women, for the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism
- building the capacities of local government actors, community leaders, young people and women in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism
- recovering areas affected by radicalisation and violent extremism

Area 4: The development of a strategic partnership and the coordination of the implementation of the strategy.

Under this axis, the strategies will consist of the following:

- strengthening consultation and cooperation mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels, in the area of the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism
- monitoring international and regional commitments to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism
- coordinating the implementation of the strategy

These challenges are interrelated and clearly reflect the transversal nature of the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism. This interrelation calls for synergy in action, based on coordination between actors to ensure greater efficiency in implementation.

5.2. Existing structures for interreligious dialogue and prevention of violent extremism

5.2.1. High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace

The HACP is a governmental institution which has existed under different names since 1995. Its mission is to cultivate the spirit of peace, maintain a permanent dialogue between the different communities of Niger and maintain mutual trust, tolerance and respect. The institution was created to monitor the implementation of the 1995 peace agreements and the additional protocols to these agreements concluded in 1998.

Located in Niger, one of the least developed countries in the world, and in a region facing various crises and conflicts, this unique institution is responsible for undertaking initiatives oriented towards consolidating peace and strengthening national unity. As such, the HACP is attached to the Presidency of the Republic and is committed to preventing local crises and conflicts. It supports reconciliation dialogues and advises the State on all measures to improve social cohesion in Niger.

The HACP has three areas of intervention:

1. Social cohesion with conflict prevention and management, mediation and dialogue
2. Support for territorial administration, justice and security
3. Support for the economic resilience of communities

Under the first area, the HACP was authorised to appoint project managers and regional delegates in regions that are vulnerable from a security point of view. These individuals are salaried but remain in their respective camps and villages, where they act as relays for the HACP. They participate in security monitoring in their regions. The HACP organises forums and mobile audiences and creates consultation frameworks. Peace caravans travel through sensitive regions on missions to raise awareness and explain state policy.

As part of its mission to prevent conflicts and promote dialogue for peace, the HACP supported the set-up of the CDIR in 2019 to prevent any kind of religious radicalisation and conflict in Niger. The interventions of the HACP in the field of preventing violent extremism are ensured by the Directorate of Conflict Prevention and concern all layers of the population, including young people.

According to the official interviewed, the HACP is seeking support from external partners for its interventions aimed at young people to:

- Support the economic resilience of communities to prevent violent extremism for social cohesion, in particular by helping young people to develop spaces where they can be empowered through agricultural technical training and other professional training
- Raise community awareness, especially that of young people and women, through caravans on the evils of violent extremism and training to detect the signs of radicalisation

5.2.2. National Committee for Intra- and Interreligious Dialogue

The CDIR is a strategic tool for preventing intra- and interreligious violent extremism in Niger. It was founded by religious leaders, including the Committee's current national coordinator, Cheikh Barham Aboubacar, and the Archbishop of Niamey, Laurent Lampo. The Committee is made up of Sunni, Sufi, Shiite, Protestant, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness and even atheist members.

Officially created by the Ministerial Decree of 16 April 2019, the CDIR is an association constituting a framework for intra- and interreligious meetings for information, consultation and exchange of experiences and actions with a view to promoting tolerance and consolidating peace for the well-being of the population.

As such, it specifically aims to:

- Undertake mediation and reconciliation actions for lasting peace
- Sensitise the population on peaceful cohabitation between the followers of different religions
- Conduct public awareness campaigns for behaviour change
- Promote intra- and interreligious non-violence in Niger
- Facilitate relations between legally recognised associations and the authorities on the one hand, and international organisations on the other
- Carry out any action aimed at improving the well-being of the population in its field of competence

According to its Permanent Secretary, the mass participation of young people in peacebuilding through intra- and interreligious dialogue is one of the CDIR's prospective actions in its approach to achieving its objectives by 2025. This is why the CDIR fully contributed to the creation and formalisation of the OJDI, an initiative instigated by a young peace activist and supported by the President of the CDIR.

Only structures working for peace and aspiring for solidarity and community spirit can join the CDIR. Each member structure proposes two member representatives for the Committee. Youth currently represent 5% of all CDIR members, estimated at over 3,500 nationwide. Within the CDIR, young people's role involves sharing messages of peace between religions through awareness training and mediation missions in conflict zones.

By 2025, the CDIR intends to undertake the following programmes:

- Strengthening intra- and interreligious dialogue for the prevention of conflicts and the promotion of tolerance between the different Islamic tendencies in Niger in the eight regions of the country
- Strengthening intra- and interreligious dialogue for the prevention of conflicts and the promotion of tolerance between the different Christian tendencies in Niger in the eight regions of the country
- Strengthening intra- and interreligious dialogue for peaceful coexistence between Muslim and Christian communities in Niger
- Strengthening the participation of women and young people in the promotion of intra- and interreligious dialogue and the consolidation of peace

According to the officials interviewed, difficulties currently encountered by the Committee include the lack of an office housing the national headquarters, which preferably, should be composed of the offices of representatives of all the religious classes who are members of the Committee, a space for dialogue, a conference room and a sports field for friendly competitions as a means of strengthening links between different religions.

5.2.3. Youth Organisation for Interreligious Dialogue

In 2012, during a training session focused on Islamic-Christian dialogue, organisers and participants converged on the idea and the need to formally set up a framework for interreligious dialogue for young people aimed at values of peace, tolerance and fraternity. It is in this logic that these young people decided to set up a non-governmental organisation (NGO) supported by the CDIR.

This NGO, called the OJDI, has the general objective of contributing to the consolidation of peace and cultivating the bond of brotherhood between the population through intra- and interreligious dialogue. The OJDI specifically aims to work towards mutual understanding between different communities, contribute to fraternity and solidarity between young people and promote dialogue about work and life between young people.

Any young person who embraces the principles of the organisation in accordance with its statutes and internal regulations can become a member of the OJDI. Members want to make the community more peaceful and undertake to prevent all forms of extremism through intra- and interreligious dialogue. The organisation is made up of more than 250 young people of both religions (Muslim and Christian), including 105 girls, mostly Christians. It has focal points in the seven other regions of the country.

The activities of the OJDI include:

- Training on topics related to the promotion of peace
- Advocacy and public relations for peace
- Raising awareness through lecture-debates
- Field visits
- Exchange meetings
- Community and humanitarian activities
- Strengthening the capacities of young people

- Support for the resilience of young people

Although the OJDI has successfully implemented three projects with the support of NGOs, including SOS Civisme, CADEV-Niger and the Catholic Church of Niamey, the organisation is facing difficulty getting officially recognised and does not have an office that can house its national headquarters or office equipment to do its work properly.

6. Conclusions

Freedom of worship is a reality in Niger, a country with a Muslim majority. This freedom of worship is enshrined in law in the Republic of Niger and has a dedicated national strategy. The latter stipulates the Government's recognition of interreligious dialogue and its promotion for peace and social cohesion. The Government has also developed its own strategy for the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism with the same aim of contributing to the promotion of optimal conditions conducive to stability, the strengthening of lasting social peace and the improvement of human security. These two strategies recognise the role that youth can play in achieving social peace, particularly between the different religions of the country.

The Nigerien Government does not have a committee or body specifically dedicated to youth in the framework of interreligious dialogue for the prevention of violent extremism in Niger. However, the HACP, created in 1995, is the high government body in charge of peace consolidation in Niger. It includes interreligious dialogue for peace components in its programmes and devotes a specific department to conflict prevention, which deals with preventing violent extremism. This Government body has, however, supported the creation and establishment of a national NGO, the CDIR, officially recognised by the Nigerien State in 2019. It is specifically created for intrareligious and interreligious dialogue in Niger and has components for youth and the prevention of violent extremism in its objectives and action plan. This national NGO has, in turn, contributed to the founding of the OJDI, an NGO entirely created by young people to promote and apply interreligious dialogue within the framework of the prevention of violent extremism in Niger. This NGO is still in the process of being recognised by the Government but started to carry out certain activities in the field in 2020.

We recommend that the State of Niger accelerate the recognition process for the OJDI and facilitate the founding of such initiatives by young people to support them in the exercise of their activities so that they can help prevent violent extremism and fight radicalisation.

We also recommend that national and international organisations support the HACP, CDIR and OJDI with technical, financial and material support in the execution of their action plans and in expanding the scope of their activities so that all communities throughout the national territory can benefit from their programmes for the preservation of peace and security.

Although interreligious dialogue is still in its primitive state in Niger, young people are beginning to learn about it and realise its importance for preventing violent extremism and the role they can play in peacebuilding.

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About the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities

The JLI is a learning network of researchers and practitioners, building fair and equitable spaces to create and share evidence on religions in development and community work. The JLI aims to strengthen partner-ships between and amongst faith and non-faith actors, internationally and locally.

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