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BEYOND THE 'WILD WEST'

The Gold Rush in Northern Niger

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Front cover photo

A miner reaches for his metal detector in the Djado region, northern Niger. Source: Djibo Issifou, 2016.

Overview

This Briefing Paper examines how the gold rush in northern Niger has affected the security, political, and socio-economic dynamics of this sensitive region. The first part discusses the mechanics of the gold rush, which started in 2014: the nature of the mining sites, the various participants, and the (limited) role of the state in the region. The second part focuses on the effects of the gold rush on northern Niger: increased local wealth and new elites on the one hand, more banditry and arms trafficking on the other. It notes, however, that there is little evidence of gold mining providing material or financial support to extremist groups. And while the wealth of some miners and local businesspeople who transport miners and supply them with necessities increased, the local economic upturn did not spread to the national economy. The paper concludes that future mining will need to industrialize to access deposits deeper underground, now that surface gold deposits are largely exhausted. This change may result in increased socio-economic and security instability, both in northern Niger and in the wider region.

Key findings

- The gold rush in northern Niger involves both foreigners and local notables—including political and military actors who own or control mines—making it a sensitive issue.
- The gold rush caused security incidents, including increased banditry, intercommunity rivalries, and occasional tensions with Algeria.
- Arms trafficking in the region has increased with the opening of the gold mines. This increase is likely to be linked to the area's new-found wealth, its pervasive insecurity, and the inability of the Nigerien government to adequately police such a vast region.
- The impact of the gold rush on local society has not made northern Niger fertile ground for recruitment by extremist groups. There is little indication that such groups are present at the mining sites, though it is possible that mining indirectly provides funding to them.
- The discovery of gold helped to reinvigorate the economy in northern Niger, which had been adversely affected by border closures and the end of uranium mining. Although most miners do not make a profit, the gold rush created important indirect economies.

Introduction

One of the many stories recounting how gold mining began in northern Niger in April 2014 tells of a Tubu camel herder from Libya who found a heavy stone in the desert that someone in Chirfa recognized as gold-bearing rock. The people of Chirfa and neighbouring Seguedine then went into the desert of Djado to look for more gold, which they found in huge quantities.¹ Shortly after the findings in Djado, gold was also found in quantity in the Tchibarakaten region, as well as in several other nearby locations.

The discovery of what is locally called a 'gift of God' has transformed this remote part of Niger. In a short period, the area's population, which was about 800 before the discovery, grew to 40,000, and the number of vehicles increased from a handful to nearly 12,000 in 2015.² And like the many and varied origin stories of the gold rush, tales abound of the sudden wealth acquired by poor Nigeriens, but behind the success stories the reality is more complex.³

The gold miners who return from Djado or Tchibarakaten describe these areas in terms that evoke the 19th-century US 'Wild West' of books and film: a vast, lawless desert controlled by armed men, where the only aim is to get rich from the gold rush. The international media tell similar stories, but their coverage of the gold rush is limited.⁴ Control of mining or related activities by a largely absent state is virtually non-existent.⁵

This Briefing Paper will explore the gold rush of northern Niger and how it has affected the security, political, and socio-economic dynamics of this sensitive region. It is divided into two sections: the first will identify who is involved by focusing on the miners, state representatives, and the results of their interactions. The second part will look at the effects of the gold rush on the region. How has the security situation changed? How has the influx of wealth and people changed the politics and economics of this remote part of Niger? And do these changes have potential impacts beyond northern Niger?

The Briefing Paper is based on a series of 34 interviews held by the author in northern Niger and the Nigerien capital, Niamey, in February and May 2016, and in May 2017.⁶ Interlocutors included Tubu, Tuareg, and Hausa gold miners (including mine owners) from Djado and Tchibarakaten, smugglers, and traffickers involved in gold-mining-related businesses such as transport, supplying water, and trade.⁷

Further interlocutors include officials in the region, members of government, and experts in the capital. Information from the interviews is supplemented by a review of relevant literature and articles in the local and international press.

Beyond the notion of the 'Wild West'

The gold-mining context

In northern Niger lies a narrow strip of gold-mining sites stretching from the Chadian to the Algerian border. This area was home to at least 15,000 miners at the beginning of 2017.⁸ Northern Niger had two main mining areas. The first, concentrated around Djado and contained about 11,000 miners,⁹ extended over a huge area, covering some 350 km north to south and 180 km east to west.¹⁰ Locals believe that, before it was closed to individual miners by the Nigerien government in April 2017, at least 70 tons of gold were found.¹¹ The second main area lies near Tchibarakaten, north of Adrar Bous, close to the Algerian border in Agadez Region. Around 4,000 miners continue to work there. The gold-mining sites in the Djado area were more developed than those around Tchibarakaten. The harsh surface conditions, severe weather, and the fact that most of the surface deposits are exhausted mean that the number of miners decreased over time in both locations. However, given the vastness of the spaces involved and the lack of a meaningful

government presence, as well as the fact that for a variety of reasons miners typically come for only a few months before leaving (especially in winter),¹² the number of miners in the region at any given time cannot be accurately calculated.¹³

The miners in Djado

Despite the transient nature of the miners and the huge distances separating the many mining sites, the general breakdown of actors in the two gold-mining areas can be identified with relative confidence. Djado contained nearly 60 mining sites. The majority of miners there were foreigners, mainly from Chad, Sudan, and Libya. Among the Chadians, the majority were members of the Zaghawa and Tubu tribes.¹⁴ Many Zaghawa miners were officers and soldiers of the Chadian army, among whom were a significant number of deserters from a Chadian army unit in Kidal that forms part of the UN Mission in Mali.¹⁵

There are, however, indications that there were fewer Chadian miners in early 2017 than in the autumn of 2014. In response to local complaints, Nigerien authorities deported hundreds of Zaghawas originating from both Chad and Sudan.¹⁶ The reason for the crackdown may have been the foreign miners' success. In 2014, when locals complained about the foreign miners, those from Chad and Sudan outnumbered the local population and were generally thought to be more skilled, better equipped, and more heavily armed.¹⁷ This allowed them to control the best mining sites and exploit them to the exclusion

of local groups or other Nigeriens who were less heavily armed and worse equipped. Foreigners are also believed to be responsible for much of the thefts and banditry in the area, adding to their unsavoury reputation among the locals.¹⁸

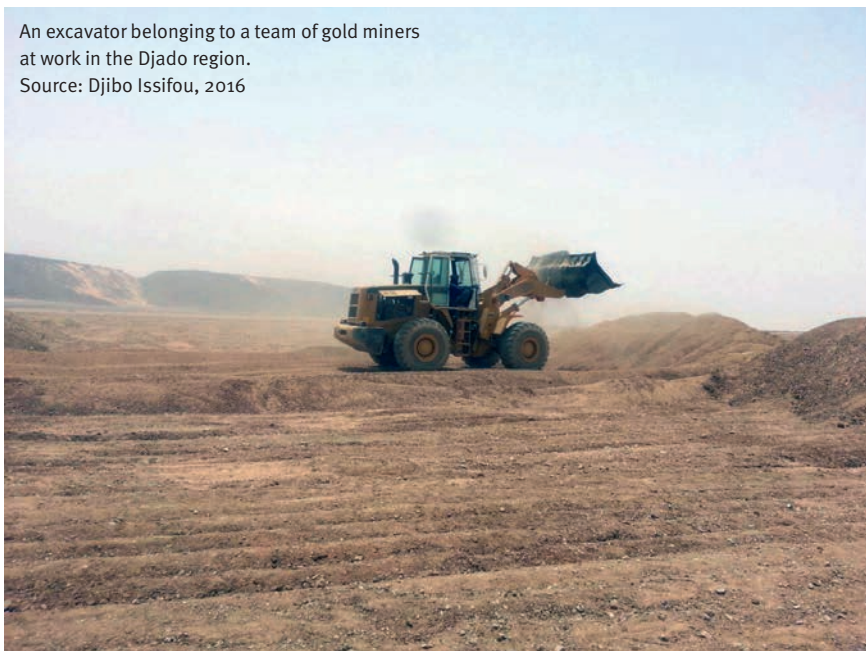
It is difficult to estimate the number of foreign miners at the diggings in early 2017, before their closure. Starting in 2015 there was an influx of miners, some Chadian and others ostensibly Nigerien who are apparently Chadians with new Nigerien identity documents. These miners were tolerated provided that they worked for Nigerien interests. In addition, Tubu miners from Libya were present,¹⁹ while Nigeriens from outside the region were also present in numbers, including Tuaregs from Agadez and others from all over the country.²⁰ After the diggings were closed, many miners left but some may have remained.²¹ The lack of a meaningful state presence means that the movements of this array of people and nationalities are neither properly recorded nor controlled, making the numbers given above only broad estimates based on interviews and anecdotal evidence.

The miners in Tchibarakaten

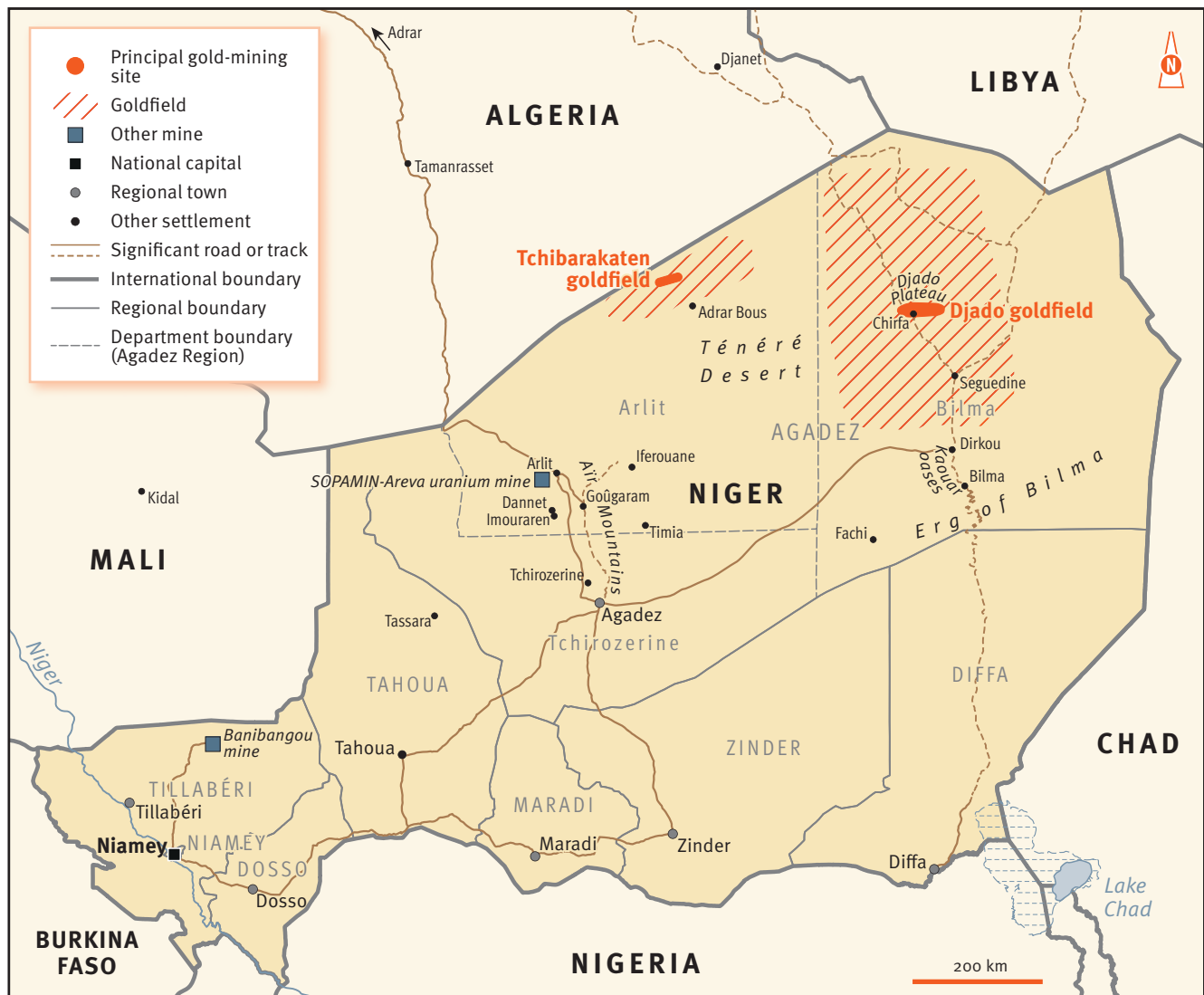
The situation is different in Tchibarakaten to that in Djado in that most of the miners in this area are Nigerien. Surrounding the main mining site, 14 additional sites are operational.²² In the main site, called Taghaba, the majority of miners are Tuaregs (who make up the majority of the population of Agadez Region).²³ In the surrounding sites Tuaregs²⁴ still dominate, but Tubus and Hausas are also present, together with nationals from Burkina Faso and Mali. The latter also have a reputation as skilled miners due to their experience at home,²⁵ like miners from many other West African countries.

The other major difference from Djado is those who control the mines in the Tchibarakaten area, which are considered more strategic from a political and security point of view. From the early stages of the gold rush, elites in Agadez and Arlit have largely controlled the Tchibarakaten sites; foreigners have never dominated in the way they did in Djado. The Tuareg influence in this area may firstly be explained by its remoteness. Tchibarakaten is far more difficult to reach than Djado, and lies 400 km from Arlit and 600 km from Djanet in Algeria. Just to be assured of finding the mining area requires intimate knowledge of the region of the kind that foreigners do not possess, and sufficient

An excavator belonging to a team of gold miners at work in the Djado region.
Source: Djibo Issifou, 2016



Map 1 Goldfields of northern Niger



stores of fuel, water, and food, which many cannot afford. As a main stopover on Tuareg small-scale trading, smuggling, and migration routes between Arlit and Djanet, this area is therefore well-known to them.

In addition, this influence may also be in part due to the negligible presence of the Nigerien state in the region or the Tuaregs' long-standing grievances against the central government in Niamey. It is notable that most of the owners of local mining sites are not only Tuaregs, but Tuaregs who were either members of the last rebellion (2007–09) or had relatives who were rebels.²⁶ These factors suggest that the combination of a lack of state presence and the strength of Tuareg grievances convinced the authorities in Niamey to cede control of the mines to the Tuaregs, perhaps in the hope that the profits would remain in the local economy and help to ensure socio-political stability (see below).

State presence and regulation at the mining sites

Direct state presence: the Defense and Security Forces

The presence of the Nigerien state in the gold-mining areas is best described as equivocal. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that the state is largely absent from both Djado (at least prior to its closure to small-scale miners) and Tchibarakaten. The state actors with the most robust presence in the region are the Nigerien Defense and Security Forces (NDSF)—especially the army—represented by a single commander overseeing both mining areas, even though they are over 300 km apart.²⁷ The army is also chronically understaffed in the region.²⁸ Given the vast distances, the lack of soldiers, and the level of armament of some miners, it is not unreasonable to

conclude that the army is unable to control the area in any meaningful way.²⁹

Despite its lack of numbers and difficult command structure, however, the NDSF has a real presence on the ground in both gold-mining areas. In Djado its presence was felt in an allegedly extortionist sense.³⁰ For example, locally based soldiers were accused of seizing the equipment used by miners—especially foreign miners—and ransoming it back to its owners by way of a 'fine'—although not one in any formal or legal sense. In 2016 soldiers were alleged to have imposed a 'tax' on the use of metal detectors: XOF 100,000 (USD 167) for Nigeriens and XOF 200,000–300,000 (USD 335–502) for foreigners, to be paid in gold.³¹ At other times soldiers just seize metal detectors and resell them.³²

The ability to make significant extra income made being assigned to Djado one of the more attractive postings in the Nigerien military. (The northern part

of the country was perceived as one of the worst places to be assigned to before the gold rush.) Whatever the hardships associated with the duty, it was perceived to offer the opportunity to return to Niamey greatly enriched. Whether from the imposition of 'fines', the ability to buy inexpensive used cars over the border in Libya, or by hiring locals to search for gold, a posting to the region can be lucrative.³³

In Tchibarakaten the army plays a somewhat different role. It is sometimes called on to manage tensions among gold miners, and occasionally even between gold miners and the Algerian security forces (see below). The army is also tasked with controlling speculation, particularly with regard to the price of water. And as an extension of maintaining its own water supplies at its bases in the region, it also provides convoy protection.³⁴

This latter activity started out as a purely military function: protecting the delivery of water by truck between Agadez and army bases in the region in Dirkou and Tchibarakaten. Recognizing the practical benefits of army protection, gold miners—as well as local residents and even the staff of international humanitarian organizations—joined these convoys because they offered such protection in an otherwise lawless area. In turn, the army recognized that it was providing a valuable service to the gold miners and began to charge for this service: initially a payment of fuel was levied, but later a fixed price had to be paid in gold.³⁵

Local populations appreciate the convoy system, but it is far from perfect.

For example, despite the convoys being ostensibly a weekly occurrence, the reality is that the army travels only when it needs to. During the hot months the convoys reliably go weekly, because army garrisons use more water. During the cooler months, however, the convoys often go only once every two to three weeks. This can present difficulties for miners in the field, because the risk of holding gold stocks at mining sites is significant, as is the risk of transporting stocks back to the regional centre, Agadez, without an escort. Sometimes the Nigerien army will provide a few vehicles to escort a convoy back to Iferouane, on the route to Agadez, in exchange for payment in gold.³⁶ Compared to the 'regular' convoys, these convoys are less protected and there is an element of risk: it is impossible for two or three vehicles to adequately secure a convoy of several hundred trucks. Attacks by bandits—always a threat in the area—do occur, particularly on the less protected convoys.³⁷ Miners often choose to join these less protected convoys, however, because they represent a lower risk than not travelling to Agadez.³⁸

Direct state presence: civilian authorities

The only other official presence in the region is constituted by a few very weak municipalities near the mining sites, in Agadez, Dirkou, and Arlit (the nearest municipality to Tchibarakaten). In Agadez the regional administration launched the Observatory for Administrative Monitoring

of Gold Mining Activities.³⁹ Operating under the Ministry of the Interior, the observatory was inaugurated in 2014.⁴⁰ It is designed to regulate mining activities in the region, including by limiting who can mine and where they can do so. This is supposed to be accomplished by licensing miners: the acquisition of 'gold-mining cards' from the observatory allows holders to mine legally. According to an observer, however, in practice the observatory's work has been erratic to date. It is also charged with working with the World Bank and African Development Bank on joint projects to improve the mining sector, including the provision of metal detectors, water tanks, and drilling equipment to licensed miners.⁴¹

Indirect state presence: mine owners

In addition to its official presence in the region, the state is indirectly represented by the many political and military actors who own mining sites. According to several influential actors involved in the gold business in Niger, many powerful people own valuable mines: from ministers to mayors to senior military officers, the powerful are said to have their own teams looking after their mining interests in Djado and Tchibarakaten. The actual nature of these people's involvement is an open question. There are indications that the involvement of some political actors is limited to a form of sponsorship. Young Nigeriens ask community leaders for assistance in the form of equipment or money to buy it (including metal detectors, fuel, etc.). In return for a percentage of the proceeds of their mining activities, they are provided with what they need to go to the mines. The political actor thus gains potential income and solidifies his status as deserving of continued electoral support.⁴²

Other political actors are or appear to be more directly involved. It is widely believed in the community that some prominent political actors purchase gold from small-scale artisanal miners and transport it from the mining areas for onward resale to foreign buyers. Some miners are also possibly relatives of political or military elites.⁴³ Certainly, many miners claim to be relatives of or sponsored by such elites, without clear evidence of these links. For example, many miners in the two mining regions claim affiliation with Prime Minister Brigi Rafini's team, although there is no



A pair of gold miners at work in the Djado region.
Source: Djibo Issifou, 2016

evidence that the prime minister has such a team in the area. It is possible that the people claiming such an affiliation—largely from the Tuareg community, it is said—are or were advisors to the prime minister.⁴⁴ It is equally possible that the people making such claims have nothing to do with the prime minister and are only claiming the affiliation to protect themselves from other miners.

From this it can be concluded that, while political and military elites do appear to be involved in mining to some extent, this is certainly less than is claimed on the ground. In addition, it is likely that the regime, which is built around the ruling party, the Parti Nigérien pour la démocratie et le socialisme (PNDS), has tried to co-opt some of the most influential gold miners at the two sites in order to strengthen the country's stability.⁴⁵

Security consequences of the gold rush

Regional insecurity

The gold mines of Djado and Tchibarakaten are referred to locally as the 'Wild West', in no small part because of the pervasive insecurity in the mining region.⁴⁶ Conflict among miners is a daily occurrence. They fight over mining sites (access, rights to mine, etc.), resources, breaches of contract (informal or oral contracts), or in retaliation for robberies or previous conflicts, among other things. These conflicts can be

“While political and military elites do appear to be involved in mining to some extent, this is certainly less than is claimed on the ground.”

bloody: one source claimed that there was a murder every 48 hours at the diggings, although this is impossible to confirm.⁴⁷

To combat the insecurity that prevails, many of the new inhabitants of the region have banded together in communities to protect themselves. These communities are largely ethnically homogeneous, not least because many conflicts are products of long-standing ethnic feuds, such as the well-known Tubu–Tuareg rivalries.⁴⁸ It is this conflict that is believed to be behind the clash that resulted in the deaths of six miners in Tchibarakaten in 2015.⁴⁹ There are also tensions between Zaghawas and Tubus from Chad (RFI, 2014b).

Increased banditry

Robberies on the road are also a significant source of insecurity in the mining region. Such insecurity is generated both by the banditry itself and by the endemic mistrust it causes at the mining sites.⁵⁰

Hold-ups and banditry are not new in northern Niger and have been present for centuries. In 2009, shortly after the Nigerien government's failure to integrate former Tuareg rebels into the military, banditry in northern Niger increased. Locals were the main target and local buses or onion trucks were attacked on certain routes—for example, between Agadez and Arlit. As drug traffickers increased their presence in the region, bandits targeted them, because they were the source of higher returns than most civilians.⁵¹ Since 2014, however, miners have been the preferred targets, not least because holding up miners is seen as less risky than stopping drug convoys.⁵² Dangerous roads are the result: local assessments indicate that roughly 30 per cent of the vehicles leaving gold-mining sites without a Nigerien security forces escort are attacked.⁵³

The bandits are of two types: 'traditional' and newcomers.⁵⁴ In some ways the phenomenon of the traditional road bandit is paradoxical. Families from the region who were traditionally road bandits gave up this 'profession' in favour of more lucrative pursuits: mining and the provision of mining-related services.⁵⁵ Simultaneously, both the number and value of potential targets have increased exponentially, perhaps convincing some traditional road bandits not to abandon their ways. Indeed, although there is little evidence that these traditional road bandits are behind the attacks on vehicles returning from the mines to Arlit and Agadez, many miners are convinced that they are responsible.

The newcomers to road banditry can also be sub-divided into two categories: professionals and ad-hoc bandits (that is, those who take advantage of an opportunity for banditry when it presents itself, but do not make it their primary profession). Various types of people have been named as bandits: Nigeriens from outside



A cemetery for miners who lost their lives in the diggings of the Djado region.
Source: Djibo Issifou, 2016

“Arms trafficking in the region has increased with the opening up of the gold mines.”

the region, Tubus and Zaghawas from Chad or Libya, and even members of Nigerien security forces stationed in the area.⁵⁶ There is some evidence to support the contention that members of the military are involved in road banditry, and officials are aware of the issue.⁵⁷ According to one Nigerien government official, some soldiers involved in road robberies have been arrested, although others are allegedly left unpunished for unknown reasons.⁵⁸

Border security issues

The Algerian border is also a source of insecurity. Given the proximity of the Nigerien gold deposits to the border and the similarity of the topography on either side of the border, it is widely known that large deposits of gold are also present in nearby Algeria. As a result, miners claim that hundreds of their number sneak over the border using traditional smuggler camouflage techniques and spend the night mining gold, returning before sunrise.⁵⁹

Algerian forces have reacted to these incursions with arrests and incursions of their own. In July 2015 around 150 Chadian

nationals were arrested,⁶⁰ while several hundred Tuareg miners have also been reportedly jailed in Algeria for illegal mining.⁶¹ In January 2017 several Tuareg miners were assaulted by Algerian army soldiers and at least ten were jailed (*Air Info*, 2017). Also in July 2015, in one of many alleged clashes with illegal miners, the Algerian military entered Nigerien territory to burn mining camps and arrested dozens of miners for illegal mining. According to one source, the Algerians were pursued by the Nigerien military, which managed to capture one of their trucks. The Algerian personnel were released after the Nigerien military secured the release of the Nigerien miners the Algerians had arrested.⁶²

Arms trafficking

Arms trafficking in the region has increased with the opening up of the gold mines.⁶³ This is true both empirically (in terms of the numbers of arms trafficked) and in comparison with other types of trafficking, such as drugs. This increase is likely to be linked to the area's new-found wealth,

its pervasive insecurity, and the inability of the Nigerien government to adequately police such a vast region with so few personnel. Trafficking in illicit arms is largely confined to small arms and ammunition.⁶⁴ The two most popular weapons are pistols (mostly from Turkey and known locally as 'Turkiya'),⁶⁵ and self-loading AK-pattern rifles, which are used for personal protection.⁶⁶ As in Libya, most Turkiya are converted blank-firing handguns.

Most of the weapons illicitly sold in the region are believed to come from Libya, allegedly smuggled into Niger by Tubus from Libya or members of Arab tribes with ties to that country.⁶⁷ The smugglers are said to import the weapons as a sideline to their main smuggling business. For example, a Tubu smuggler whose business was second-hand vehicles was also said to be offering new AK-pattern rifles for sale that were sold with three or four ammunition clips per weapon.⁶⁸

Other weapons illicitly trafficked to the region are believed to include small arms from Chad.⁶⁹ Chadian nationals are reputed to be important arms dealers in Djado. Most miners from Chad arrive well-equipped with pick-up trucks and small arms. When they leave for home the miners allegedly sell this equipment, including their small arms, to miners remaining in Niger. In addition, many soldiers from the Chadian military are said to be among the miners. They are reputed to bring with them their military-issue weapons, which they also sell when they leave.⁷⁰

Sales of illicit weapons are not confined to mining camps. At 'Site 20'—so called because it is about 20 km from the main Djado mining site—there was a market that included small arms among the goods for sale. An AK-pattern self-loading rifle with a folding stock could be bought for 18 grams of gold (about USD 527) and a Turkiya for about five grams (USD 167). Sales of small arms are not limited to Site 20 or other markets, however. As a miner from Tchibarakaten noted, the sound of gunfire is a nightly occurrence in the mining camps as miners test out small arms they intend to buy.⁷¹

The gold rush as a source of support for extremist activity?

Since the beginning of the gold rush, intelligence agencies have feared it could provide fertile ground for extremist groups to recruit new members, obtain material support, or finance their activities.⁷² The remoteness of the gold-mining region,



Gold miners being transported in the Djado region. Source: Djibo Issifou, 2016

the thousands of young men who have moved there, and the great wealth now being generated provide the circumstances that have yielded similar results in other areas of Africa.⁷³ The presence of a large population in an area far from effective government control also concerns intelligence agencies: Niger has previous experience of its remote regions being used as extremist bases in the past, and recent experience of extremist attacks in the region.⁷⁴

Thus far, these fears have not been realized. No evidence suggests that extremist groups are attempting to recruit miners to join their causes; in fact, there is little indication that extremist groups are present in the mining sites at all.⁷⁵ Some very minor activity has been identified. Smuggling or trafficking groups that are affiliated with extremist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) may use routes and infrastructure in and around the gold-mining sites. Also, a truck transporting arms supposedly for Ansar Dine through the mining site of Tchibarakaten was seized in 2016.⁷⁶ But the presence of such groups is transitory rather than permanent.⁷⁷ Intelligence sources speculate that this may be a result of the general caution displayed by extremist groups in the Sahel after the intensification of Western efforts to monitor the area. It is this monitoring that is credited with the arrest of a suspected extremist from Libya in Agadez in April 2016 who had stayed in Tchibarakaten as a gold miner for a time.⁷⁸

There is no evidence of extremist groups receiving material support (supplies, fuel, equipment, etc.) from gold-mining activities.⁷⁹ However, the issue of funding extremist groups from such activities is less clear. There is no evidence of the direct participation of AQIM or other extremist groups in gold mining, but the presence of Nigerien criminal groups in the region is widely suspected. Many mining sites, especially in Tchibarakaten, are believed to be owned by these Nigerien groups of smugglers or by traffickers belonging to Algerian criminal groups.⁸⁰ The latter—based in Tamanrasset or Adrar in Algeria—are suspected of paying AQIM a ‘tax’ on their operations in the region. Nigerien smugglers and traffickers may also be subject to a similar tax on their operations. In that sense, the gold rush may be indirectly funding extremist groups. At least one incident may support this statement: a gold seller arrested in Agadez in 2016 was identified as a Boko Haram supporter.⁸¹

The socio-political and economic consequences of the gold rush

A social safety valve for northern Niger

Direct economic effects

The gold rush is known locally as a ‘gift of God’. This is in part because of its unexpected bounty, but is also because the timing was particularly fortuitous. Traditional trafficking routes in the Libyan–Nigerien border regions (where various forms of trafficking were long-established sources of income) had been curtailed just before the discovery of gold by the presence in the region of the European Union’s EUCAP Sahel Niger mission, which was approved in 2012; Operation Serval, the French army’s anti-extremist operation in northern Mali that began in early 2013; and the latter’s successor, Operation Barkhane, which started in 2014.⁸² Algeria’s closure of its borders in early 2014 had a similarly restrictive effect on trafficking.⁸³ Agriculture in the region was heavily affected by severe drought in 2014, further depressing the local economy (Xinhua, 2014). And the late 2014 closure of the SOPAMIN-Areva uranium-mining project⁸⁴ in Imouraren in Agadez Region put an end to one of the last viable economic activities in the area⁸⁵ and left some 3,000 miners, support staff, and others unemployed.⁸⁶

The discovery of gold in Djado and Tchibarakaten in 2014 has therefore helped to reinvigorate the struggling local economy. But the rewards of mining are not evenly distributed, and for every miner who has struck it rich, many more struggle to earn a viable living.⁸⁷ Success in mining depends on many factors, one of the most important being in which of the two mining regions a miner works. The Djado mines were known to be more difficult to work, largely due to the living conditions in the area. On the other hand, mining in Djado was much more likely to yield results, even if only small quantities of gold were found. In Tchibarakaten success is more concentrated. Most miners—locals estimate 90 per cent—find no gold or not enough to break even, given the high cost of living in the mining camps.⁸⁸ As one miner put it:

In Tchibarakaten [it’s a lottery]: you cannot know what you are going to [find] when you dig. . . .

In Djado . . . even if it’s more difficult to find [lots of gold], you are quite sure to [find] dozens of grams per month.⁸⁹

Success can also depend on connections, particularly tribal or political affiliations. The case of Saley Ibrahim, who is locally known as Saley Boss (or simply ‘Boss’) and who is one of the most successful miners in Tchibarakaten, is instructive in this regard.⁹⁰ Saley Boss is a member of the Kel Ewey clan of the Tuareg tribe, whose home is Timia, an oasis in the Air Mountains of northern Niger.⁹¹ He hired a number of Kel Ewey miners to staff his mines, which are among the more successful in Tchibarakaten.⁹² This example can be generalized: large, powerful miners (or groups), who are often from outside the region, earn fortunes through mining, while their protégés or affiliates are enriched on a lesser scale. Other miners struggle for small gains, or even lose money.⁹³

Signs of new wealth are visible in Agadez, the regional hub. Large new houses in the Château or Pays-Bas neighbourhoods, large numbers of pick-ups (often new) on the streets, and a proliferation of ‘banks’ and money transfer agencies indicate an influx of wealth, which locals usually associate with gold mining.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, a notable part of this wealth is also due to the migration and trafficking businesses. The traditional *artisanat* (craft industry) in Agadez, which had been badly affected by the end of tourism, has gained a new importance. Prosperous Hausa businessmen buy the miners’ gold, while former artisans sell semi-precious stones found on mining sites to West African agents coming to Agadez. And some artisans have started washing gold: many miners no longer mine themselves, but buy excavated soil on a mining site and bring it to Agadez for processing.⁹⁵

Gold mining is not universally beneficial, however. Outside the region little if any material effect on the national economy is evident, while the increase in wealth has distorted some parts of the regional economy. Staple agricultural commodities have increased in price, likely because of greater demand from the influx of miners and the migration of regional labour and capital away from agriculture and into mining. For example, in Agadez onions reportedly increased in price from XOF 150 (USD 0.25) per kilogram pre-gold rush to XOF 450 (USD 0.75) per kilogram in early 2016. Similarly, sheep increased in

“If the direct economy has not universally done well from the gold rush, the indirect or hidden economy certainly has.”

price from XOF 20,000 to XOF 30,000 (USD 33–50), because shepherds sent their sheep directly to Tchibarakaten rather than to markets in Agadez.⁹⁶ Sometimes there are even shortages of basic foods.⁹⁷

Indirect economic effects

If the direct economy has not universally done well from the gold rush, the indirect or hidden economy certainly has. The gold-mining regions of Djado and Tchibarakaten are remote, far from the regional hub of Agadez, and difficult to access. Miners needed to be transported to the gold fields, while the sudden influx of thousands of new residents required a corresponding increase in goods and services to provide for them. The best-placed ‘businesspeople’ to service these new needs were the smugglers.

As noted above, smuggling is endemic to the region and has played an important role in its economy for generations. The sheer volume of increased needs in the area has engendered the creation of new smuggling networks. Some existing networks have diversified their operations, while others—including new smuggling groups—are concentrated on specific activities.

The transport of miners to the gold fields is instructive in this regard. At the beginning of 2016 an estimated 80 networks were involved in transporting miners to the Djado and Tchibarakaten gold fields.⁹⁸ Some smugglers charge a set price: costs averaged XOF 35,000 (USD 59) per person for transport by pick-up truck and XOF 25,000 (USD 42) per person by truck to the Djado gold fields, for example. There is sufficient demand to justify regular, scheduled trips.⁹⁹ Other smugglers provided free transport to Djado if a specific amount of goods—such as commodities and equipment—were bought in their shops in Agadez.¹⁰⁰

In common with gold rushes the world over, the one in northern Niger also brought scores of traders from a variety of places to

service this booming new market. Markets serving the gold fields are now established across the region: in the Djado area alone there were seven markets. All trade is conducted by bartering gold for goods.¹⁰¹ Traders from the Mauritanian diaspora in Libya and Niger are prominent among these newly arrived businesspeople.¹⁰²

The region’s isolation has also produced many entrepreneurs. As noted above, new, specialized smuggling groups bringing goods to the region supply many of the markets. Similarly, successful miners who exploit their own connections and their new capital provide other commodities. For example, successful Sudanese miners in Djado used their capital to form a new network to bring sheep from Sudan to the region. Sudanese miners are also responsible for providing other services in the Djado region: hostels for miners, public baths, and sports bars (rooms with a television where clients can have a drink and watch football).¹⁰³ Huge profits are to be made from these businesses. One miner is said to have imported whisky into Tchibarakaten, where it was previously unavailable. His investment reportedly yielded a return of 600 per cent.¹⁰⁴

The climate and environment have a profound effect on what is being traded. The most expensive necessity in both Djado and Tchibarakaten is water. Both gold fields are far from reliable sources that can supply large quantities of fresh water: the closest reliable water source to Djado is in Seguedine (about 130 km away), and to Tchibarakaten is in Djanet in Algeria (600 km away), although water is also brought in from Arlit. The distances and the unavoidable necessity of having access to adequate water supplies provide ample opportunity for profit. Chirfa-based businesspeople charged Djado miners XOF 20,000 (USD 30) for a 25-litre container of water in May 2015. In Tchibarakaten the same sized container went for XOF 30,000 (USD 50).¹⁰⁵

These profits have attracted some important players to the market. Saley

Ibrahim, the Tchibarakaten mining baron, installed a water tank with a 40,000-litre capacity to store the water he supplies. Others tried to increase the price artificially, allegedly blocking or robbing water trucks or convoys en route to the gold fields, thus making water more scarce and forcing the price up. Competition among suppliers has increased since 2015, however, driving down prices to four grams of gold (about XOF 72,000/USD 120) for 200 litres of water in Djado and seven grams (about XOF 126,000/USD 211) for the same volume in Tchibarakaten. Also, miners with money and foresight are equipping themselves to catch rainwater during the brief rainy period and selling the excess to others in the mining sites.¹⁰⁶

Mining equipment is also one of the most frequently sold products in the two mining regions. Metal detectors were considered essential equipment in the Djado gold fields and were imported from mining sites in Mali (the Kayes region), Burkina Faso, Sudan, and Chad.¹⁰⁷ The sale or rental of heavy equipment such as bulldozers, backhoes, and loaders is another staple of the mining regions. This business is largely controlled by Tubus and Arabs from Libya, from where much of the equipment was imported. It is concentrated in Djado, although a smaller marketplace is present in Tchibarakaten.¹⁰⁸ Newer trading networks bring in mercury, which is essential for gold extraction, usually from Libya,¹⁰⁹ and dynamite, mainly from either the Banibangou mine in the Tillabéri region of Niger or Burkina Faso. Although the sale of dynamite is officially banned, these new networks, which are politically influential, have obtained some form of authorization from the Nigerien government or government officials.¹¹⁰ This paradox could be explained by the demand for dynamite in mining operations and by the fact that this form of trade is financially attractive and has become a source of enrichment for intermediaries.

Vehicles are also heavily traded in the region. Various types of vehicles, including 4×4 vehicles, pick-up trucks, and heavier trucks, are essential for many aspects of mining.¹¹¹ Other second-hand vehicles are also sold in the gold-mining regions. Most of the market for used vehicles—locals estimate 70 per cent—is controlled by Tubus from Libya, who often have to rely on Tuareg intermediaries in Agadez to facilitate the entry of their vehicles into the area.¹¹² Supplies of vehicles from Libya have been important in the region

for many years, particularly after the fall of the Qaddafi regime. With the closing of the Algerian border in early 2014, Libyan imports became the only real source of vehicles.¹¹³ An estimated 150–200 vehicles per day now cross the Libyan border into Niger, with most ending up in showrooms in Agadez.¹¹⁴ These showrooms are run by either Tubus or members of the Qadhadhfa tribe, a Tubu ally.¹¹⁵ The remainder of the vehicles are sold on site in the mining regions. A pick-up is sold for about 1 kg of gold in Tchibarakaten (about XOF 18,000,000/USD 30,114).¹¹⁶

The empowerment of new local elites

One of the effects of the gold rush with the greatest potential for long-term changes to the region's political and economic dynamics is the creation and empowerment of new elites. Some owe their wealth and status to gold mining, but they are the exception: most mining sites in the two gold fields are controlled by traditional elites (including tribal leaders, wealthy and established merchants, political actors, etc.). New elites whose wealth is derived from mining or mining-related activities are more prevalent in Tchibarakaten—where people who are indigenous to the area are more heavily involved in mining—although new entrants are to be found in Djado as well.¹¹⁷

Saley Ibrahim is again instructive in this regard. As noted above, he is a successful and widely respected miner and entrepreneur who is active primarily in the Tchibarakaten fields. Ibrahim arrived at the beginning of the gold rush in Djado, took his stake from those mines and invested in the mines in Tchibarakaten, where he now controls at least a dozen mining sites. Beyond mining, Saley Boss

is heavily involved in local service businesses that include heavy equipment and generator rentals, a vehicle repair shop, supplying water, and a health-care clinic.¹¹⁸ His unique history (see above) and success make him both feared and respected in the region.¹¹⁹ One often-told tale is of an attack on a vehicle he owned that was transporting gold from Tchibarakaten to Arlit. When the bandits realized who owned the vehicle they allegedly returned it to Ibrahim with the gold intact.¹²⁰ In turn, Saley Boss has used his own increasing wealth and prominence to promote others from his clan and home town, notably Elhadj Tankari (who is known as Ibrahim's lieutenant) and Mohamed Assadeck.¹²¹ None of these men was nearly as prominent prior to the discovery of gold, but their prominence continues to grow as the gold rush proceeds.

These emerging local elites represent a serious challenge for the regime. Including these influential new leaders in the PNDS system (see above) may be the best way to ensure social and security stability in the very sensitive context of the mining sites. Indeed, the process appears to have already begun in the Tchibarakaten fields.¹²² Keeping the new Tchibarakaten-based gold barons 'onside' could help the government ease the transition from small-scale mining to industrial extraction in a way they were not able to in the Djado fields.

Conclusion: towards industrial mining?

Even though the gold rush in northern Niger has been in progress for the past three years, the reality is that its full effects are really only beginning. Most of the mining done thus far has been the

surface kind conducted by amateurs. In this sense, the gold fields at both Djado and Tchibarakaten may be characterized as being only preliminarily explored. Whether the gold deposits in these two regions are more substantial than the current surface finds, and whether the long-term exploitation of the gold by professional miners is possible, remain open questions.

In light of this, the most dramatic manifestation of the gold rush in the form of the sudden influx of large numbers of miners hoping to strike it rich can be said to be slowing. The era of big discoveries is certainly over and the 'easy' gold has all been found. In Djado, where the soil is sandy, local miners say that, prior to its closure by the government, the gold fields had virtually no surface gold left.¹²³ Only the larger operations—miners with heavy equipment and some experience who hail from Sudan, Chad, Libya, and occasionally elsewhere in Niger—were finding 'new' gold.¹²⁴ In Tchibarakaten, where the soil is rocky, miners are digging deep into the earth. As the mines have matured, it is now necessary to dig to depths below 110 metres to find gold, according to one local miner.¹²⁵ And with the very high density of the mine shafts, the risk of accidents is very high.¹²⁶

With this decrease in the volume and thus the value of 'easy' gold has come a decrease in the local population, as miners—both successful and unsuccessful—leave the region in search of opportunities elsewhere. These departures have increased the uncertainty of the region's future.¹²⁷ But optimism remains; according to a Nigerien mining engineer, the gold rush will continue in northern Niger.¹²⁸ For those who have already departed, there are new opportunities in Sudan, Chad, Algeria, and Mauritania, possibly from the same rich vein of ore that spawned the mines they left in northern Niger. In northern Mali, especially in the Tessalit region, Tuareg craft miners started mining for gold in early 2016, with relative success.¹²⁹ Others are moving to exploit new discoveries elsewhere in Niger (Grégoire and Gagnol, 2017).¹³⁰

In the immediate future the mining sector in northern Niger will likely be professionalized. In January 2016 the Nigerien government issued the first formal mining permits to Chinese, Nigerien, and Sudanese companies.¹³¹ According to the government's initial plans, during the term of the permits' validity there was to be a two-year period of enforced

Gold miners pictured at their diggings in the Djado region. Source: Djibo Issifou, 2016



The now empty gold fields in the Djado region.
Source: Djibo Issifou, 2017



cohabitation between the existing miners in the two regions and the incoming professional miners. The mining companies would have the right to explore for new deposits and exploit any they find, but they would not have the right to expel existing mining operations. After the two-year period informal miners would lose the right to continue mining.¹³²

At the time of writing of this paper the Nigerien authorities have begun to exercise greater control of the mining areas in Djado.¹³³ Despite earlier promises of cohabitation between individual miners and industrial mining operations, in January 2017 government authorities notified all of the miners in Djado that they had to leave the area.¹³⁴ As of April 2017, mining activity in Djado had ceased. A Japanese mining company is believed to be preparing to commercially exploit remaining gold reserves at Djado, and Japanese troops are allegedly training elements of NDSF, who will provide security to their operations in the area. New discoveries in the region are also being handled with more direct government control than existed when gold was first discovered in the region. For example, at the Aouzigar site (180 km east of Agadez, on the road to Bilma), only Nigerien miners were allowed to install themselves.¹³⁵ For the moment the region appears calm, despite the changes.

Whether there is any room in the future for small-scale miners is unclear. Many current miners do not possess permits at all as a result of the extremely limited presence of the Nigerien government in the region. The tension between the government in Niamey and the country's northern communities—especially

the Tuaregs of Agadez and the Tubus of Bilma—remains. The last rebellion in the region was started in large part by disputes over mining. With a significant part of the existing mining done by or for local elites, many of whom were leading figures in the last rebellion and all of whom have strong ties to the area, the government will exclude small-scale, local miners at its peril. Managed intelligently, the gold rush could bring development and increased prosperity to a long-neglected region; managed poorly, it could raise serious tensions, risking a rebellion in northern Niger. And given the general instability in the region, particularly in Libya to the north and Mali to the west, a new rebellion might not remain localized for long. ●

Notes

- 1 Author interview with a government minister, Niamey, May 2016. This story is one of many told about the origins of the northern Niger gold rush that circulate in the region. Another account claims that the gold was discovered after a car became stuck in the desert and, as the occupants struggled to free the tyres from the sand, they discovered gold; see Nigerdiaspora (2015).
- 2 Author interview with a government minister, Niamey, February 2016.
- 3 For example, a shepherd from Agadez supposedly found 5 kg of gold in the desert, allowing him to buy both a house and a petrol station in town. A compatriot from Agadez is alleged to have done even better, finding 91 kg of gold in two hours, although what he did with his new-found wealth is not recorded. And there are more general tales of young Nigeriens who go to the gold fields and return to Niamey with the financial means to marry. Author interviews, Agadez and Niamey, February 2016.
- 4 See, for example, AFP (2015); BBC (2014); Li (2014); RFI (2014a).
- 5 However, it is alleged that some of the armed groups in the gold-mining areas are part of the Nigerien security services or are collaborating with these services. Author interview with a Tuareg journalist, Agadez, February 2016.
- 6 For their protection, the identities of many interlocutors remain confidential.
- 7 Smuggling refers to the illegal transportation of legal goods, whereas trafficking refers to the illegal exchange of illegal goods or the illegal transportation of people across borders; see Kartas and Arbia (2015). Because many of the smuggled items are essentials, locals do not consider their extra-legal importation to be smuggling, but rather trade.
- 8 This total is down from approximately 25,000 miners at the beginning of 2016. Author interview with an Agadez journalist, Niamey, January 2017.
- 9 Author interview with a mining guide, Niamey, February 2016.
- 10 Author interview with a gold miner, Niamey, January 2016.
- 11 Author interview with a Tuareg notable, Niamey, May 2017.
- 12 Author interview with an Agadez journalist, Niamey, January 2017.
- 13 These estimates are based on discussions with influential gold miners and guides who work in the Djado and Tchibarakaten areas. Author interviews, Agadez and Niamey, January 2016.
- 14 Author interview with a Nigerien official, Niamey, January 2017.
- 15 In early 2016 a colonel in the Chadian army was allegedly arrested by the Nigerien army at the request of the Chadian government. Author interviews with miners and Nigerien government officials, Niamey, January 2016. Local estimates put the number of ex-soldiers present in the Djado region at about 100. Even after the expulsion of the miners from that area in April 2017, significant numbers are said to remain in Nigerien territory. Author interview with a Nigerien government official in Niamey conducted via WhatsApp, May 2017.
- 16 Reports from the area indicate that many Zaghawa miners were arrested and stripped of their gold holdings by Nigerien officials at the Chadian border (author interview with a Nigerien army officer, Niamey, January 2016). Returning miners, however, did not only face difficulties from Nigerien officials: in July 2014, Chadian authorities arrested some 500 Chadian and Sudanese miners returning to Chad after their mine in Niger was closed; see RFI (2014c).
- 17 Author interviews with miners returning from Djado, Agadez, February 2016.
- 18 Author interviews with miners returning from Djado, Agadez, February 2016. Some of these miners even used Chadian army equipment in their work, including electricity generators, the latest generation of metal detectors (for example, AK43 or G3 models), and heavy-duty equipment. At one point the Djado gold field allegedly contained over 400 backhoes that were capable of excavating truckloads of up to 60 tons.
- 19 Given their ties to Nigerien Tubus, the only way to distinguish them is often by the fact that they speak Arabic, whereas local Tubus do not.
- 20 These Nigeriens are in addition to the locals, who are largely Tubus and Kanuris. Author interview with a Nigerien official, Agadez, February 2016.
- 21 Author interview with a Tuareg notable, Niamey, May 2017.
- 22 Author interview with a Nigerien guide working for Western mining companies, Niamey, February 2016.
- 23 This is true of Agadez Region as a whole, although the town of Agadez has a majority Imaggadazen population and a historical settled population of mixed Tamasheq- and Hausa-speaking origin. For a more detailed discussion of the demographics and history of Agadez, see Prasse, Ghoubeid, and Mohamed (1998, p. 80).

- 24 The Tuareg miners are largely from Agadez Region, although some hail from elsewhere, including Tahoua and Niamey in Niger. In addition, it is rumoured that several hundred Tuareg members of Libyan armed groups (mostly from Ubari) are among the miners (author interviews with two former Mouvement des Nigériens pour la justice (MNJ) rebels, Agadez, February 2016). The MNJ is a Nigerien rebel group that was active in the region from 2007 to 2009. For more on Nigerien rebel groups, see Deycard (2011).
- 25 Author interviews, Agadez, January 2016.
- 26 Author interviews, Agadez and Niamey, January 2016. Niger experienced two rebellions. The first began in 1990 and involved most of the Tuareg tribes, as well as Arab and Tubu fighters. After the peace agreement that was concluded in 2005 a second rebellion—that of the MNJ—started in 2007. This rebellion ended in 2009, partly thanks to the personal mediation of Muammar Qaddafi; see Grégoire (1999); Deycard (2011).
- 27 Author interview with a Tubu miner, Tchibarakaten, January 2016, and a Nigerien army officer who spent time in Dirkou, Niamey, January 2016.
- 28 Author interview with Mohamed Anako, president of the Agadez Regional Council, Niamey, January 2016.
- 29 Author interviews, Agadez and Niamey, January and May 2016.
- 30 Author interviews with various Djado gold miners, Agadez, February 2016.
- 31 For larger pieces of equipment such as back-hoe loaders, the ‘tax’ required was 100 g of gold per month, per device. The taxes collected were allegedly shared between all Nigerien authorities present in the region. Author interview with a Tuareg notable, Niamey, May 2017. Further information derived from conversations with various Djado miners; author interviews with miners, Agadez, February 2016.
- 32 Metal detectors are essential equipment for miners in the region and were subject to shortages in early 2016 after the discovery of gold in Mauritania. Author interview with a Tuareg miner from Agadez conducted via Skype, May 2016.
- 33 Author interview with a Nigerien army officer, Niamey, February 2016.
- 34 Author interview with a Nigerien army officer, Niamey, February 2016.
- 35 Author interviews with gold miners, Tchibarakaten, January 2016. For example, the cost of a convoy escort from Tchibarakaten to Arlit is XOF 250,000 (USD 418) in gold.
- 36 Author interview with a Tuareg miner who has worked in both the Tchibarakaten and Djado mining regions, Agadez, February 2016.
- 37 Author interview with a Tuareg miner who has worked in both the Tchibarakaten and Djado mining regions, Agadez, February 2016. The miner described being attacked while being escorted in a lightly protected military convoy.
- 38 One other risk mitigation tactic involves transporting deposit bearing rocks directly to Arlit or Agadez where they are crushed and the gold removed. See Grégoire and Gagnol (2017).
- 39 L’Observatoire pour le suivi administratif des activités aurifères.
- 40 The observatory includes the secretary-general of the Agadez governorate; the governorate’s regional director of mining; the prefects of Iferouane and Bilma; and regional mayors; as well as representatives of the regional mining, hydraulics, sanitary, and education sectors. Author interview with a Ministry of Mining official, Niamey, February 2016.
- 41 Author interview with a Ministry of Mining official, Niamey, February 2016.
- 42 Author interview with an influential Tuareg from Agadez, Agadez, January 2016.
- 43 Author interview with an influential Tuareg from Agadez, Agadez, January 2016.
- 44 Nigerien prime minister Brigi Rafini is a Tuareg from Agadez Region. He is believed to have many part-time Tuareg advisors, some of whom are reputed to be members of smuggling or trafficking networks and who may have turned their attention to the gold-mining regions as a new potential source of profit. Author interviews with several gold miners, Agadez, January 2016.
- 45 Author interview with several Nigerien officials, Niamey, January 2017.
- 46 Author interviews with several gold miners, Agadez and Niamey, January and February 2016.
- 47 Author interview with a Nigerien security source who spent time in Dirkou, Agadez, January 2016. The source spent more than a year in the region monitoring mining operations.
- 48 Author interview with a Tuareg miner who had worked in Djado and Tchibarakaten, Agadez, January 2016.
- 49 This clash was mentioned by several sources in Niamey and Agadez. Author interviews, Agadez and Niamey, January and February 2016.
- 50 One miner described the lengths to which he went to prevent anyone from knowing how much gold he had found: ‘When I find [some gold] I put it in a bag which never leaves my [underwear]. Trust me, it is the only place where nobody could find it, given there is no wife on the sites!’ Author interview with Tubu miner from Tchibarakaten, Niamey, January 2016.
- 51 Author interviews with a Tuareg miner who has worked in Djado and Tchibarakaten, Agadez, and a Nigerien security source who spent time in Dirkou, Agadez, January 2016. The security source spent more than a year in the region monitoring the mining operations.
- 52 Author interview with an Agadez journalist, Agadez, January 2016. This is not to say that civilians are not attacked as well; they are, but less so.
- 53 Author interviews with two gold miners who suffered attacks, Agadez, February 2016.
- 54 Author interview with a Tuareg gold miner from Timia, Agadez, February 2016.
- 55 Author interviews with several miners, Agadez, January 2016. For example, Etoubouloum, a veteran road bandit, was arrested for banditry in 2014 by Nigerien security forces. He was released in 2015 after swearing on the Koran that he would stop being a bandit and has since gone into the mining business. The well-known miner Saley Ibrahim (see below) is also reputed to be a former road bandit, but is now one of the most powerful figures in the mining sector.
- 56 Author interview with a Tuareg guide, Agadez, January 2016. For example, a local story recounts the arrest of a Fulani road bandit by the Nigerien security forces. Other sources, including a Nigerien official the author encountered in January 2017, supported the belief that banditry is widespread among various populations.
- 57 For example, a former rebel associated with the MNJ, Mohamed Adjidar, informed the Nigerien military command in Agadez that a suspicious car was driving between Dirkou and Agadez. The car turned out to be driven by soldiers allegedly looking for a mining convoy in order to rob it. In another incident in Djado, Tubu miners from Chad killed two Nigerien soldiers on leave from the National Guard. The two had allegedly attempted to rob the miners, but had not realized that the Chadians were armed. Author interviews with Ibrahim Manzo Diallo, founder of the online news magazine *Air Info*, Agadez, February 2016, and with Nigerien government officials, Niamey, February 2016.
- 58 Author interview with a Nigerien government official, Niamey, May 2016. It is reasonable to assume that the lack of punishment could be partially explained by the authorities’ lack of sufficient resources to punish the alleged robbers, or by corruption.
- 59 These traditional techniques include covering one headlight of a vehicle with mud so as to appear from a distance to be a motorcycle. Illegal miners are also alleged to turn off their cell phones to prevent them from being used to track their owners’ activities, a method that is said to be successfully used by extremist armed groups in the Sahel. Author interviews with some gold miners, Agadez, January 2016.
- 60 Several media stories have mentioned these arrests since 2015, while in April 2016 the Algerian authorities sent back 103 Chadian miners to Chad; see VOA Afrique (2016).
- 61 Author interview with a Nigerien government minister, Niamey, May 2016.
- 62 Author interview with a gold miner, Niamey, January 2016. The information was confirmed by an Agadez-based journalist. Author interview, Agadez, February 2016.
- 63 In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Qaddafi regime illicit arms flows were generally from Libya into the Sahel and beyond. More recently, arms flows have reversed, and trafficking is largely towards Libya and its continuing conflict; see CAR (2016).
- 64 There is some evidence that light weapons are also available for sale. Rumours suggest that grenade launchers—for example, the M80 Zolja (Wasp) anti-tank weapon—and rocket-propelled grenade launchers

- (RPGs) are available. Although there is little evidence to suggest the former are actually for sale, Nigerien security forces did seize some RPGs north of Arlit in November 2015. Whether gold-mining interests planned to use these weapons is an open question, because jihadist non-state armed groups are present in the areas adjacent to the gold-mining areas. It is thought that these groups and drug smugglers are also implicated in trafficking heavy machine guns in the region. Author interviews with a Nigerien intelligence officer, Niamey, January 2016, and a civilian involved in smuggling, Agadez, January 2016. See de Tessières (2017) for a more detailed discussion of illicit arms flows in Niger.
- 65 Author interview with a gold miner who had bought a Turkiya, Agadez, February 2016.
- 66 For more information on types of materiel trafficked from Libya, see UNSC (2016).
- 67 This was reported to the author as a widely held belief.
- 68 Author interview with an influential miner, Agadez, January 2016.
- 69 Author interview with a Nigerien official, Niamey, January 2017.
- 70 Author interview with a Tubu miner from Djado, Agadez, January 2016.
- 71 Author interview with an influential miner, Agadez, January 2016.
- 72 Author interview with a Nigerien intelligence officer, Niamey, January 2016.
- 73 See also Grégoire (1999).
- 74 Author interview with a Nigerien intelligence officer, Niamey, January 2016. The well-known extremist figure Mokhtar Belmokhtar took refuge in the Tassara region of western Niger from 1999 to 2003, for example, and claimed responsibility for a pair of attacks in Arlit and Agadez in 2013 (BBC, 2013). For information on extremist attacks in the wider region, see, for example, Tié (2015).
- 75 Author interviews with former miners from both the Tchibarakaten and Djado gold fields, Niamey, January 2016. Miners generally agree that extremist groups are not present, even if some mining camp regulations (for example, forbidding the presence of women and alcohol) may be inspired by more conservative religious interpretations.
- 76 Author interview with a Nigerien official, Niamey, January 2017.
- 77 Author interview with a Nigerien security source who had spent time in Dirkou, Niamey, January 2016.
- 78 Author interview with a Nigerien government official, Niamey, May 2016.
- 79 Gold mining utilizes many tools and materials that would be useful to extremist groups, notably dynamite. But although there is evidence of the unsafe storage and unregulated trading of dynamite in the mining region, there is no evidence that it is being sold or otherwise transferred to extremist groups (Sahelien.com, 2016; author interview with a local civil society observer, Agadez, January 2016).
- 80 Author interviews with some Tuareg gold miners and a ministerial advisor, Agadez and Niamey, January 2016.
- 81 Author interview with a Nigerien official, Niamey, January 2017.
- 82 Author interviews with three former smugglers, Agadez, January 2016; see also Nossiter and Schmitt (2013).
- 83 Author interviews with three former smugglers, Agadez, January 2016; see also Ben Ahmad (2014).
- 84 SOPAMIN (Société du patrimoine des mines du Niger) is the Nigerien government's mining company that operated the mine in conjunction with the French multinational Areva. Author interview with representative of Areva Mines, Niamey, January 2016. See also Africa Intelligence (2015).
- 85 Author interview with an Areva Mines representative, Niamey, January 2016.
- 86 Sources estimate that half the workers were former MNJ rebels, while about one-third were Tuareg from Agadez. Author interviews with a Compagnie minière d'Akouta (COMINAK) employee and an Areva employee, Agadez and Niamey, February 2016.
- 87 Author interviews with several gold miners, Agadez and Niamey, January and February 2016.
- 88 This was reported to the author as a widely held belief.
- 89 Author interview with a gold miner from Djado, Agadez, January 2016.
- 90 Saley Ibrahim has a colourful history that is deeply intertwined with that of his country. He earned the nickname 'Boss' in the Front liberation de l'Aïr et Azawagh (a rebel group that was active from 1991 to 1995) after he attacked some Nigerien army officers. Imprisoned, he escaped during the 2007 Tuareg rebellion, aided by a prominent MNJ fighter. He turned to banditry after his escape, although he had a reputation for fairness that he earned by targeting drug traffickers and not civilians. He was imprisoned for robbery in Chad in 2008–11. He returned to his ancestral home of Timia after his release and became a successful farmer and entrepreneur. When gold was discovered in Djado he hired over 200 local youths and went first to the Djado gold fields, then to Tchibarakaten. He is now considered one of the most powerful individuals in northern Niger and is regarded as the 'ruler' of Timia. Author interviews with several local sources, Niamey and Agadez, January and May 2016. Note that the author has specifically chosen to mention Saley Ibrahim's name in this Briefing Paper as his activities are well-known, both in the region and in Niamey.
- 91 See Bourgeot (1995) for a discussion of the Kel Ewey.
- 92 Author interviews with several corroborative local sources, Niamey and Agadez, January and May 2016. The Kel Ewey have long been known for their agriculture in Niger, although its importance was largely regional. After working in Ibrahim's mines, these Kel Ewey returned to Timia with their new-found wealth. Many used their mining earnings to promote the clan's traditional agricultural pursuits and are now trying to expand their agricultural businesses throughout Niger (Daouda, 2016).
- 93 Author interview with Mohamed Anako, president of the Agadez Regional Council, Niamey, January 2016; and with a miner, Agadez, February 2016.
- 94 This is by no means certain. Some of this new wealth may be attributable to people smuggling, for example. Author interview with Mohamed Anako, president of the Agadez Regional Council, Niamey, January 2016.
- 95 Author interview with an Agadez journalist, Agadez, February 2016.
- 96 Author interview with a Tubu miner from Tchibarakaten, Niamey, January 2016.
- 97 Ifrouane is one such place that has experienced produce shortages. Author interviews with an Ifrouane resident and a syndicalist from Agadez, Agadez, January 2016.
- 98 The notion of a network is very relative here. Most of these 'networks' are just individuals who have a car or a bus and who transport miners. Many people formerly operating in small-scale trade or smuggling have switched to transporting miners because it is less dangerous than crossing the border.
- 99 Author interview with a Tuareg transporter of miners, Agadez, January 2016. As of January 2016 there were three trips per month by truck.
- 100 Author interview with an Agadez civilian, Agadez, January 2016.
- 101 Author interview with a Tuareg guide from Djado, Agadez, February 2016. Some markets even charge an entrance fee of XOF 2,000 (USD 3).
- 102 Author telephone interview with a smuggler operating between Algeria, Libya, and Niger, April 2016. For more on the Mauritanian diaspora, see Bensaâd (2011).
- 103 Author interviews with three miners, Djado, Niamey, and Agadez, January 2016.
- 104 Author interview with a Tchibarakaten miner, Agadez, January 2016.
- 105 Author interview with a Tchibarakaten miner, Agadez, January 2016.
- 106 Author interview with an important Djado gold miner, Agadez, January 2016. Water prices in Djado are said to have been pushed down by the arrival of an aggressive merchant of Arab extraction from Libya.
- 107 Author interviews with several corroborative local sources from the gold-mining sector, Agadez, Niamey, and Bamako, January and March 2016.
- 108 Author interviews with several gold miners in Tchibarakaten, Agadez, and Niamey, January and February 2016. It is unclear at this time what effect the closure of the Djado gold fields to individual miners will have on the market for heavy equipment, if any.
- 109 Author interview with a Nigerien engineer involved in gold mining in Djado, Niamey, February 2016.
- 110 Author interview with an Agadez civil society representative, Agadez, January 2016.
- 111 According to one informal assessment made by a Tubu man from Bilma, there

- were some 380 vehicles associated with mining in the region as of the beginning of 2016, with most (if not all) belonging to non-Nigeriens. Author interview with a Tuareg notable, Niamey, May 2017.
- 112 Author interviews with local sources, Agadez, January 2016. For example, many miners refer to Mohamed Ag Assadeck, a Tuareg with substantial mining interests, as one such intermediary.
- 113 Author interview with an Agadez smuggler, Agadez, February 2016.
- 114 Author interviews with several miners, Niamey and Agadez, January 2016.
- 115 Author interview with a Tchibarakaten gold miner, Niamey, January 2016. It is widely believed that the imported vehicles are often filled with other goods for later sale in the region. For example, many miners described frozen chickens arriving in Libyan vehicles, transported in refrigerators in the back of pick-up trucks.
- 116 Author interviews with two gold miners, Niamey and Agadez, January 2016.
- 117 Notably members of the Kel Ifoghas Tuareg clan, who are from the area. Author interviews with a Tuareg miner from the Kel Ewey clan who has worked in both Tchibarakaten and Djado, Agadez, January 2016.
- 118 Saley Ibrahim is reputed to directly employ over 80 people at his various service enterprises. Author interview with a Tuareg notable, Niamey, May 2017.
- 119 Author interviews with various actors close to Saley Ibrahim, Niamey, January, February, and June 2016.
- 120 Author interview with a Tubu miner from Tchibarakaten, Niamey, January 2016. Indeed, so strong is Ibrahim's reputation that local miners are said to entrust him (or his vehicles) with their gold for transport to Arlit.
- 121 Assadeck's marriage further illustrates the wealth and power of these new elites. In a video of the event, Saley Boss, Tankari, and another 'big man' from Agadez, Koré 'le Blanc' (a Tubu) are seen dancing and handing out allegedly multimillions of cash in the local currency (video provided to the author by a local source, and interview with an Agadez civil society activist, Agadez, January 2016).
- 122 Author interview with a Tuareg notable, Niamey, May 2017.
- 123 Author telephone interview with a gold miner who had left Djado, May 2016.
- 124 Author interview with a Tubu miner from Tchibarakaten, Niamey, January 2016.
- 125 Author interview with a Tubu miner from Tchibarakaten, Niamey, January 2016.
- 126 Author interview with a Nigerien mining engineer, Niamey, February 2016.
- 127 Author interview with Mohamed Anako, president of the Agadez Regional Council, Niamey, June 2016.
- 128 The engineer claimed that the vein of ore at Tchibarakaten stretched for another three, unexploited miles towards the Algerian border. He foresaw at least 1,600 new mines in this stretch. Author interview with a Nigerien mining engineer, Niamey, February 2016.
- 129 Author interview with a Malian Tuareg leader, Bamako, April 2016.
- 130 The lucrative gold fields of Djado and Tchibarakaten have helped to fuel a sort of national mania for gold mining, which has created massive gold rushes at many of the places where gold is discovered. The recent gold rushes at 'Arafat Mountain' in Zinder (April, 2017) and near Niamey a few weeks later can perhaps be traced to this mania (Grégoire and Gagnol, 2017).
- 131 The Nigerien government issued two exploration permits for the Djado region to Mine Crustal, a Chinese company. For fields near Iferouane, the government issued an exploration permit to the Société saharienne d'équipement et d'exploitation des mines et pétrole (SEEMP). And for potential fields north of Arlit, the government issued three permits to Abbarci Mining, a Sudanese company. For more details, see Niger (2016).
- 132 According to the government, informal mining will be phased out by not renewing existing permits, which will allow the mining sector to professionalize. Author interview with a Ministry of Energy official, Niamey, February 2016.
- 133 Chadian president Idriss Deby has allegedly expressed similar concerns about the risk that the Chadian miners (like their Sudanese counterparts before them) could fund a Libya-based Tubu rebellion against Chad. Author interview with a Tuareg notable, Niamey, May 2017.
- 134 Unofficially, the government's decree may have been motivated by the desire to prevent the funding of the Tubu rebellion launched by Adam Tcheke in August 2016 (*Jeune Afrique*, 2016). Indeed, even if Tcheke (a Tubu) does not represent a huge threat to Niger's stability, the fact that many militiamen from Sudan and Chad, including deserters from the Chadian army, controlled mining sites in Djado raised the prospect of some degree of collusion between them and the Tubu rebellion. Author interview with a Nigerien official, Niamey, January 2017.
- 135 Author interview with a journalist, Niamey, May 2017.
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