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NIGER

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Introduction

1. ADF International is a faith-based legal advocacy organisation that protects fundamental freedoms and promotes the inherent dignity of all people. As well as having ECOSOC consultative status with the United Nations (registered name 'Alliance Defending Freedom'), ADF International has accreditation with the European Commission and Parliament, and the Organisation of American States. ADF International is also a participant in the FRA Fundamental Rights Platform.

2. This report highlights the growing persecution of Christians in Niger and calls on the government to protect freedom of religion or belief for all people.

(a) Freedom of Religion

3. 98 percent of Niger's population is Muslim, and less than two percent is Protestant or Roman Catholic. While there is no established religion, freedom of religion is protected under Article 30 of the Constitution, subject to respect for public order, social peace, and national unity.[1]

4. On the 2020 World Watch List, which ranks the top 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian, Niger was ranked number 50.[2] Niger rejoined the list for the first time in five years, indicating the rising hostility towards religious minorities.[3]

5. Christians are persecuted largely by family members and the local community, and are subject to discrimination through corrupt practices by some local officials. For example, individuals who engage in corrupt practices against religious minorities are not adequately prosecuted.[4]

6. Islamist religious leaders have had increasing influence on the government, and extremist Islamist organisations are on the rise.[5] Furthermore, the country is facing a significant increase in militant Islamist terrorism.[6] There continues to be a threat from outside Islamic extremist groups: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) in Niger's northwestern border, and from Boko Haram in the south.[7] For example, from January to August in 2019, at least 179 people were kidnapped by Boko Haram, amounting to nearly one person a day. A majority of these individuals were young women and girls.[8]

7. Since 2017, the Government of Niger has placed the Diffa region and several provinces in the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions under a State of Emergency, in

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[1] Constitution of Niger, Art 30.
[2] Open Doors, Niger, https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/niger/.
[3] Jayson Casper, *The Top 50 Countries Where It's Hardest to Be a Christian,* CHRISTIANITY TODAY, 15 Jan. 2020, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/top-christian-persecution-open-doors-2020-world-watch-list.html.
[4] Open Doors, *supra* note 3
[5] *See* Open Doors, Niger, https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/niger/
[6] *See* Jonathan Luxmoore, *Christians Threatened as Islamists Push for Control Over Africa's Sahel,* NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER, 13 Apr. 2020, https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/christians-threatened-islamists-push-control-africas-sahel.
[7]Open Doors, Niger: Country Dossier, Dec. 2019, https://www.opendoorsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/WWL-2020-Country-Dossier-Niger.pdf
[8] *Boko Haram Kidnapped Nearly 1 Person a Day in Niger*, INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN, 13, Aug. 2019, https://www.persecution.org/2019/08/13/boko-haram-kidnapped-nearly-1-person-day-niger-year/.

response to the growing number of attacks.[9]

8. After the 2015 attacks carried out by Islamist extremists, which burned 70 churches and killed at least 10, Niger has seen a rising tension among religious groups.[10] Unfortunately, previously good relations between Christians and Muslims are now being threatened by the growing radicalisation of some extremist adherents of Islam.[11]

9. In May 2016, a Christian man was killed by mob violence for his comments on social media regarding the prophet Mohammad. The mob looted 25 shops, as well as set fire to a Christian church, killing three additional individuals.[12]

10. In October 2016, a Christian humanitarian worker was kidnapped by an Islamic State terrorist group in Niger's northern desert. Although Nigerien President Mahamadou Issoufou confirmed that the worker was still alive with his kidnappers in 2019, a release has yet to be negotiated.[13]

11. In October 2017, the teenage daughter of a pastor was kidnapped by the militant group Boko Haram. This event followed a July kidnapping conducted by the group, where forty women and children were taken from the Diffa region.[14]

12. In 2018, a Catholic missionary priest was abducted by a Salafist extremist group from the Bomoanga parish, near Niger's border with Burkina Faso.[15] Thirteen months after the abduction, the Bomoanga village was attacked by jihadists, specifically targeting mission schools in the area.[16]

13. In May 2019, a Catholic parish was attacked by terrorists near the northwestern border, leaving the priest wounded.[17]

14. In June 2019, following the arrest of a prominent imam, demonstrators set fire to a church in the city of Maradi.[18]

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[9] *See* Hassane Moustapha, *Niger Declares State of Emergency in Regions Near Mali's Border,* BLOOMBERG, 4 Mar. 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-03-04/niger-declares-state-of-emergency-in-regions-near-mali-border

[10] *70+ Churches Destroyed As "Anti-Charlie" Protests Spread in Niger*, WORLD WATCH MONITOR, 20 Jan. 2015, https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/01/70-churches-destroyed-as-anti-charlie-protests-spread-in-niger/.

[11] Open Doors, *supra* note 8.

[12] Kingsley Omonobi, *Four Killed, Church, Others Burnt as Religious Violence Breaks Out in Niger,* VANGUARD, 31 May 2016, https://allafrica.com/stories/201605310320.html.

[13] *See also* James G. Meek & Aicha E. H. Castano, *American Hostage Held by ISIS Is Alive: Niger President*, ABC NEWS, 9 Oct. 2019, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/american-hostage-held-isis-alive-niger-president/story?id=66124077.

[14] *Niger: Pastor's Daughter Kidnapped by Suspected Boko Haram Militants*, WORLD WATCH MONITOR, 17 Oct. 2017, https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/10/niger-pastors-daughter-kidnapped-suspected-boko-haram-militants/

[15] *See also* Samuel Smith, *Missionary Abducted in Niger Shown Alive in Video Released by Jihadists,* THE CHRISTIAN POST, 14 Apr. 2020, https://www.christianpost.com/news/missionary-abducted-in-niger-shown-alive-in-video-released-by-jihadis.html

[16] *Mission Schools Attacked in Niger,* VATICAN NEWS, 21 Oct. 2019, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2019-10/niger-mission-schools-jihadist-attack.html

[17] Linda Bordoni *Catholic Parish Attacked in Niger,* VATICAN NEWS, 14 May 2019. https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2019-05/niger-parish-catholic-priest-attack-niamey.html

[18] Francesca Merlo, *Niger: Protesters Set Fire to Christian Church,* VATICAN NEWS, 17 June 2019 https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2019-06/church-niger-protests-fire-muslim-imam-arrest.html

15. In June 2019, a Christian woman was kidnapped by Boko Haram and released three days later, with a message to Christians from the militant group which read: “leave the town within three days or be killed.”[19]

Protection of Religious freedom

16. Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees the right to freedom of religion, including the freedom to worship with others, which is supported by Article 22’s guarantee of freedom of association. Additionally, Article 27 from the ICCPR emphasizes that States must protect the rights of religious minorities to profess and practise their own religion.

17. While the government and the laws of Niger in theory guarantee freedom of religion, in practice the right to free exercise of religion is hindered when social hostility against Christians and other religious minorities is not tackled, and their places of worship and homes are targeted for vandalism and destruction.

18. To protect the rights of Christians and other religious minorities to have the freedom to practise their religion, Niger must allocate resources to safeguarding their churches and houses of worship. In the event of protesting, rioting, or other violence, local governments and, where possible, the national government must deploy adequate security forces to protect churches and the homes of Christians. It is imperative that Niger must also bring to justice the perpetrators of these crimes against Christians.

19. Niger should continue to demand for the release of abducted Christians from Islamist militant groups. Without showing initiative and commitment to combatting illegal kidnappings against Christians, the right to practise faith publicly is hampered in Niger.

20. Niger must also focus on countering growing Islamist radicalisation. Although this may be caused by a number of complex factors and cannot be addressed easily, the government should work to improve conditions that enhance religious tolerance, including through improved access to education and the promotion of interreligious dialogue.

(b) Recommendations

21. In light of the aforementioned, ADF International suggests the following recommendations be made to Niger:

    (a) Adopt all the necessary measures to protect Christians and other religious minorities from all forms of violence and discrimination;

    (b) Deploy security forces in a timely manner to protect Christian churches and homes from violent attacks;

    (c) Take increased action for the release of abducted Christians from Islamist militant groups;

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[19] *Boko Haram Threatens Niger’s Christians,* INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN, 14 June 2019, https://www.persecution.org/2019/06/14/boko-haram-threatens-nigers-christians/.

(d) Promote religious tolerance through interfaith and increased access to education in order to counter social hostility against religious minorities and prevent radicalisation;

(e) Partner with international organisations and other states in its counter-terrorism efforts so as to best protect freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, and freedom of association.



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