The Niger that I know

Until four US soldiers on a counter-terrorist training mission were attacked and killed there in November, I suspect most Americans had never even heard of Niger.

Truth is, when I was first offered a two-year stint in Niger with the Peace Corps in 1977, I didn’t know the country existed, either. "These guys in Washington must be calling Nigeria by its capital," I told myself, with the hubris common to many graduating college seniors.

Since then, I have been to Niger a dozen times, including 15 months as a Fulbright scholar. But I shall never forget those first minutes 41 years ago when the doors of the plane carrying the 60 of us tired but excited Peace Corps volunteers finally opened.

Although it was way past midnight local time, the heat crashed into the passenger cabin. Even before my feet hit the tarmac, I was drenched in sweat. An unfamiliar smell of cooking smoke and garbage wafted into my nostrils, a memory that reasserts itself on every subsequent visit to West Africa. And the sand was ubiquitous even in Niamey, the capital. In the following days, I readjusted my understanding of “beggar” – until then a Bowery bum looking to buy a drink – when I saw a little girl begging alongside her sightless father. A few nights later past midnight, leaving a discotheque pulsing with music, I ran into a man pulling along a camel. It’s a city of poverty and misery, exuberance and hope.

On separate trips later I brought my preteen son and my teenage daughter. I speak Hausa, the most widely used language in Niger. But on account of Al Qaeda-affiliated infiltration from nearby Mali and Boko Haram spillover from neighboring Nigeria, for a span of six years I did not return. Until now. How could I go, friends and family worried, so soon after those American soldiers were targeted and killed, and when Boko Haram is still brainwashing children into suicide bombing?

The rural village where I maintain my Hausa home away from home is just 200 miles from the congested Nigerian city of Maiduguri, the target of repeated Boko Haram attacks. Indeed, the day after I crossed the border into Nigeria in December, a would-be suicide bomber infiltrated an extremely crowded area that distance from my home. But that terrorist’s target was the subway under New York’s Times Square, 200 miles from my home in Massachusetts.

And then there are the school shootings. The first email I ever received in Hausa, in March 2001, expressed concern for my sixth-grader, Samuel: My friends in Niger and Nigeria had heard about a school shooting in the United States, one of four that month. I struggled to translate this American tragedy into an African idiom to answer their painfully direct questions: How, in my land, do children so easily get their hands on weapons of war? Why do Americans bring guns into their houses of learning? What is the illness that prompts the young among my people to kill their classmates?

In addition to being perplexed by violence in US schools, Nigeriens are baffled by Americans’ fear of Niger and its people. “But we are the ones fighting the terrorists!” they insist in Hausa and French (Niger’s official language) whenever I bring up the concern for my safety that preceded my arrival. “The terrorists are attacking us. We are the ones who get hurt first.”

In US news feeds, Niger is linked with Boko Haram and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Some even suggest that Islamic State fighters are involved with these West African scourges. Lost is the fact that Nigeriens are overwhelmingly victims of terrorism and not perpetrators of it. They are our friends.

Niger is 98 percent Muslim. Even though Boko Haram and AQIM claim to be acting in the name of Islam, every Nigerien I speak with says that followers of these groups are not true Muslims.

“How can they be? Islam forbids exactly what they are doing!” is the common refrain. And while some of my friends attribute Boko Haram and AQIM atrocities to ignorance and poverty (Niger is the least-developed nation in the world, according to the United Nations), most simply shake their head and admit that they do not understand terrorism, or terrorists, at all.

Living in Niger changed my view of Africa, Islam, and humanity. It has taught me how dignity flourishes in the face of poverty and how Islam is a religion of peace, welcoming visitors of all races and religions as fellow creations of God. Celebration of life, exuberant hospitality, and poignant generosity – these are what make this African society so enchanting. All this, we should not forget, in one of the most Muslim nations on earth.

It would be a pity if America’s current preoccupation with Niger’s security crisis served only to reinforce stereotypes about deprivation and danger in the “Dark Continent.” That doesn’t describe the Niger that I know.

–William F.S. Miles