



(IN)SECURITY OUTCOMES FROM THE COUP IN NIGER

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On the night of 25 July and 26, Niger experienced a coup which resulted in the arrest of President Bazoum by Chief Abdourahmane Tchiani, the leader of the National Council for the Safeguard of the Nation (CSNP) military junta, who claimed legitimate executive and legislative power in the country (Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale [ISPI], 2023). Located in the Sahel region, Niger shares borders with Algeria and Libya to the north, Chad to the east, Nigeria and Benin to the south, and Burkina Faso and Mali to the west (Fuglestad & Laya, 2023).

The Sahel region has been grappling with a profound and intricate crisis driven by a combination of factors such as jihadist movements, state instability, climate crises, criminal networks and social unrest (Walther, 2017). This crisis in the Sahel began in 2011 with an armed insurrection in northern Mali, which subsequently affected neighbouring countries like Niger and Burkina Faso (Walther, 2017). These regional security crises led to the establishment in 2013 of the French military mission, Operation Barkhane, to restore stability (Walther, 2017). However, the mission officially ended in 2022, representing a failure in France's strategy in maintaining stability in the Sahel region (Doxsee et al., 2022).

The situation in Niger remains uncertain; President Bazoum is still confined to his residence, but he has confirmed that he is in good health (BBC, 2023). Furthermore, he communicated with French President Emmanuel Macron, as French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna reported to AFP (BBC, 2023). This indicates that the coup is not yet definitive (ISPI, 2023). France considers Niger to be a significant economic and political ally. Paris relies on Niger for uranium exports, importing most of its natural uranium from the country (Tertais, 2014). Niger provides 15% of France's uranium requirements and constitutes one-fifth of the EU's overall uranium imports (Leali, 2023). Politically, President Bazoum remains the last democratically elected President in the Sahel region, undertaking a positive relationship with French President Macron (Anna, 2023).

In the aftermath of the coup, the streets of Niger have become the stage for contrasting demonstrations, with both pro-coup and anti-coup groups voicing their stances (Anna, 2023). These protests reveal the deep political polarisation present in the country and the ongoing struggle for influence and control from foreign actors and within the political and military establishment (Anna, 2023). Notably, on 27 July, hundreds of people gathered in Niger's capital, Niamey, showing their support for the Wagner group and brandishing Russian flags during the demonstration (Anna, 2023).

The reasons behind Tchiani leading the coup are still unclear. The soldiers who took control in Niger claimed that their actions were driven by security concerns (Camara, 2023). This excuse has become a common narrative often employed by coup-makers (Camara, 2023). While it is true that Niger, like its neighbouring countries, is confronted with violence from extremist groups, including those associated with Boko Haram and the Islamic State, history has shown that military rule tends to exacerbate such crises, as demonstrated in the experiences of neighbouring states (Camara, 2023).

The last Western Partner in the Sahel region?

The recent coup in Niger is not an isolated event but fits into a troubling pattern of military coups that have taken place in Africa since 2020. The region has already witnessed six coups since then, with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad being among the countries affected, alongside various unsuccessful attempts in Niger (ISPI, 2023). Prior to the coup, Niger had stood as a crucial partner in the Sahel in countering extremism in a Francophone region where anti-French sentiment eventually paved the way for the presence of the Russian private military group Wagner (Anna, 2023).

Remarkably, Niger was the last remaining democratic country in the area (ISPI, 2023). In February 2023, Bazoum's democratic victory in the country marked a significant milestone in the political and economic relations between Niger and the West (ISPI, 2023). Moreover, following Mali's decision to replace French military support with Wagner mercenaries, Western nations redirected their resources to bolster Niger's security forces and combat Islamist insurgent groups associated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State that operate in the region (Peyton, 2023). As part of this effort, the European Union decided last December to initiate a three-year mission to train Niger's army (EU, 2023).

The EU Military Partnership Mission (EUPM) in Niger is an integral part of the EU Integrated Approach. This policy encompasses various tools, including support for peacebuilding, conflict prevention, dialogue facilitation, development cooperation and humanitarian assistance (EU, 2023). This Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) mission aims to work in conjunction with these efforts to address security challenges effectively (TheDefencePost, 2023).

Nowadays, the 27-nation bloc had been reassessing its presence in the volatile Sahel region following a reduction in its training mission in Mali, which was a response to the deployment of Russian mercenaries supporting the ruling junta (TheDefencePost, 2023). The revised approach involved specialised training in areas like countering improvised explosive devices and potential communication and command support for the military in Niamey (TheDefencePost, 2023). Moreover, France has strategically designated Niger as a critical stronghold for its counter-insurgency endeavours in West Africa (Peyton, 2023).

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The country hosts around 1,000 to 1,500 French troops, supported by drones and warplanes (Peyton, 2023). These French forces primarily aid Niger's military, particularly in border areas where joint operations are conducted alongside local forces, connecting Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (Peyton, 2023). Furthermore, Italy has had a presence in Niger since 2018 through the Niger Bilateral Support Mission in the Republic of Niger (MISIN) mission, and it is also part of the Task Group Air Sahel, a rapid response air force. Additionally, Rome has also been constructing the Niger Aerospace Medicine Competence Center (CEMEDAN) (ISPI, 2023).

Consequences of the coup on Sahel's regional security

Niger finds itself at the epicentre of geopolitical interests, attracting attention from various nations, including China, its primary arms supplier (Bartlett, 2023). President Bazoum's non-aligned position, maintaining relations with China, Russia, Europe and the U.S., highlights the intricate nature of Niger's foreign policy (Bartlett, 2023). The country's position and involvement in the ongoing geopolitical dynamics underscore its significance in the broader regional context.

Meanwhile, Russia's presence and influence on the African continent has risen, evident in the unfolding situation in Niger (Peyton, 2023). Notably, the prominent display of Russian flags during the coup indicates a considerable Russian influence, similar to what was observed in previous coups in Mali and Burkina Faso (Raineri, 2023). While the number of Russian flags in Niger was comparatively lower, it still indicates the involvement of foreign interests in the region (Anna, 2023). Moreover, reports have surfaced about a disinformation campaign orchestrated by Russia in Niger, further complicating the situation (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023).

Besides the threat from Wagner mercenaries, Niger has been a base of the international military operation for years as Islamic extremists have greatly expanded their reach in the Sahel (Mednick, 2023). Those include Boko Haram in neighbouring Nigeria and Chad (Anna, 2023). Still, the more immediate threat comes from growing activity, in Niger's border areas with Mali and Burkina Faso, from the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara and the al-Qaeda affiliate *Jama'ar Nusrat al-Islam wal-Musliin*, known as JNIM (Anna, 2023). Thus, the coup in Niger brings additional challenges to the security situation in the region, with UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently stating: "We are witnessing that the whole belt south of the Sahara is becoming an extremely problematic area" (UN Press Conference, 2023, par. 3).

Another instability outcome from the recent coup refers to migratory routes. The Sahel region experiences significant migration levels, exacerbated by the ongoing conflicts in certain Sahel countries (UNODC, 2023). Niger is a central hub for migration routes that connect West Africa to the Mediterranean (Raineri, 2023). Along these lines, the porousness of Libyan borders has consequently transformed Niger into an external outpost of the Union's (anti-) migration policies on its southern front (Raineri, 2023).

Between 2012, when the violence escalated, and late 2021, the Central Sahel witnessed the displacement of at least 2.3 million people (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). Efforts to counter smuggling, primarily through the enforcement of stringent migrant smuggling laws, seem to have played a role in the development of fresh smuggling routes linking Niger and Libya (UNODC, 2023). Furthermore, the rise of new migrant smuggling hubs in southern Algeria have also been noted (UNODC, 2023). Consequently, smuggling routes in the Sahel have become more covert and varied to avoid heightened scrutiny by defence and security forces (UNDOC, 2023).

This situation exposes refugees and migrants to higher risks and dangers. This is why a regime change in Niger may worsen the clandestine migration market already present in the Sahel region (Ranieri, 2023). Accordingly, one of the motives behind Italy's military mission in Niger is to control migration flows from Libya, along with protecting various economic interests and a considerable Italian community (ISPI, 2023). In sum, Niger's energy resources and strategic location make it a vital partner for Italy, both from a security perspective and economically (ISPI, 2023).

Conclusion

Understanding Niger's inner political dynamics is vital, as external interests, such as those of Wagner, often exploit internal issues to exert influence. The coup in Niger has far-reaching security implications, and its complex geopolitical backdrop warrants careful examination to anticipate future outcomes. The coup in Niger has intensified security concerns in the Sahel region and attracted the attention of various global players. The multifaceted crisis poses challenges for domestic and international stakeholders, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies involved to develop effective responses and promote stability in the region.

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