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**THE SAHEL CRISIS - WHAT IS HAPPENING
IN NIGER?**

**FOREIGN ACTORS AND FURTHER
DEVELOPMENTS**

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This InfoFlash completes the picture and follows up after “The Sahel Crisis - What is Happening in Niger? A First Look”.

1. Missions in Niger

Today, Niger hosts Niger Air Base 201—the US’s largest drone base (Jones, 2023), located in the city of Agadez—which is used to monitor extremist groups (Gordon, 2023), and to which, “as a precautionary measure” (Mitchell, 2023) after 26 July, the US repositioned a portion of its personnel. Following the coup, which the US only acknowledged as such on 10 October (Miller, 2023), monitoring drone flights were suspended; as of mid-September, they have slowly and discreetly resumed (Gordon, 2023). That which has not resumed, however, are US training efforts despite having spent around 500 million US Dollars in Niger, of which 110 million were used to construct the drone base in Agadez. Additionally, as a result of the categorisation of the events of 26 July as a coup d’état, the US is suspending the bulk of its assistance to Niger. In fact, section 7008(a) of its Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 states that “None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available [...] shall be obligated or expended to finance directly any assistance to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d’état or decree” (Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, 2022). The US had already suspended certain assistance programmes totalling circa 200 million US Dollars; as of 10 October 2023, they are suspending all assistance short of life-saving humanitarian, food, and health assistance (Miller, 2023). Today, although about 1,000 personnel are based in Niger, it is unclear whether they will stay, and if they do, for how long (Babb, 2023).

According to Bill Roggio, editor of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies’ Long War Journal and former soldier, the US “is barely keeping a lid on this problem, and when you remove that, when you remove all of those enablers that help keep these jihadists from overrunning countries or overrunning regions, then you are giving them an advantage” (Babb, 2023). It is likely that efforts to combat jihadism will be severely hampered not only by the instability in the country and the region, but also by the pulling out of French forces from Niger, and if the U.S. also chooses to leave, there will no longer be a lid to speak of which might keep jihadism at bay.

The European presence in Niger, too, is partially waning—especially the French. The country is home to three French bases, the most important one being BAP 101 Niamey, which houses most of France’s troops (Ministère des Armées, 2023); in line with Macron’s 24 September announcement, they will be evacuated by the end of the year. This means that as of 2024, Chad will be the only country in Africa known to be home to a French base.

In Niger, Italy also has one of its largest foreign missions in Africa—MISIN—with around 300 soldiers stationed there (Ministero della Difesa, 2023). For the time being, there is no impending evacuation but the Italian Minister of Defence Guido Crosetto has stated that Italy is closely monitoring the situation in Niger and that the safety of their civilian and military conationals is of the utmost importance (Ministero della Difesa, 2023).

An EU mission which, on the other hand, seems to have been chosen to keep operating is the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger), which was launched in 2012 at the request of the Nigerien government. Its stated mission is to “strengthen Niger’s internal security sector and its capacities in the fight against significant security threats” (EUCAP Sahel Niger, 2023). It “works to promote the interoperability of Nigerien security forces, to develop criminal investigation capacities, to facilitate coordination in the fight against terrorism and organised crime as well as to improve the sustainability of the security forces” (Council of the European Union, 2015). Its launch was decided following the increased violence and trafficking, both in drugs and human beings, which bled from Mali, then Burkina Faso, and into Niger. The mission is one of support—of the Nigerien Internal Security Forces, of national authorities, of non-state actors—as the country itself cannot cope with these threats on its own (EUCAP Sahel Niger, 2023).

For its 2022-2024 mandate, it was announced on 9 September 2022 that the mission would have a budget of 72 million Euros and 210 members from 16 Member States (EUCAP Sahel Niger, 2022). There is no news of this mission being ended, nor of the Nigerien junta demanding the departure of the mission’s members. Further, Josep Borrell visited the mission on 1 August 2023, giving no indication of the cessation of activities.

Similarly, there is no indication that the European Union Military Partnership Mission will not follow through to the end of its three-year mandate. Established in December 2022 and launched in February 2023, this mission aims to “enhanc[e] the military capacity of the Nigerien Armed forces in order to support Niger in its fight against terrorist armed groups in compliance with Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law” (EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger, 2023).

2. Niger Takes Matters Into Its Own Hands

Following ECOWAS’ ultimatum—the legitimacy of which is debatable (see (Raube, 2023))—Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter, a mutual defence pact, which established the Alliance of Sahel States. Its stated objective, as declared by Assimi Goitam, the leader of the Malian junta, on X, formerly known as Twitter, is “to establish an architecture of collective defence and mutual assistance for the benefit of our populations” (France24, 2023).

Much like the North Atlantic Treaty’s famed Article 5—“The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all” (The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949)—the Liptako-Gourma Charter states that “Any attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of one or more contracted parties will be considered an aggression against the other parties” (Felix, 2023). The Charter also binds the three countries together in their fight against Islamic insurgents; all three committed to help one another, individually and collectively, to prevent or settle armed rebellions (France24, 2023).

3. Russian Influence

Despite French military personnel being forced out of a third country in the Sahel, the continued presence of the EU in Niger is important, as Russia's Wagner Group has consistently shown that it is ready to step in and fill the power vacuum created when the West takes a step back. The most recent example of this can be found in Mali, where the Malian government and armed forces turned to the mercenary group following their latest coup and subsequent ousting of French and international forces. Purportedly Kremlin-linked, researchers believe that the Wagner Group is being deployed to the Sahel, not to address insecurity in the country, but rather in service of a politico-economic quid pro quo: the mercenaries ensure that the junta stays in power, and in exchange are given financial and mineral concessions (Thompson et al., 2022).

However, Wagner mercenaries are not known to follow the rule of law, nor have they meaningfully changed the situation in Mali vis-à-vis violent extremism; rather, there have been reports upon reports of alleged dismal human rights abuses since the Russian group's arrival in December 2021. Human Rights Watch reported that since December 2022, dozens of civilians have been either summarily executed or disappeared, civilian property has been destroyed and looted, and detainees tortured in an army camp (Human Rights Watch, 2023). A United Nations Human Rights Office report also found that it is highly likely that more than 500 people were summarily executed in Moura, Mali, in March 2022 by Malian troops accompanied by "foreign military personnel." The latter was described by witnesses as "'armed white men' who spoke an unknown language operating alongside the Malian forces and at times appearing to supervise operations" (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023). Who is to say that the same will not happen in Niger if the West abandons ship? Although stuck between a rock and a hard place, western blocs and countries must endeavour not to cut off all ties with either Niger or the region in general, working to find a balance between enforcing accountability for human rights transgressions and enforcing consequences for turning their back on democracy, but also keeping the Wagner group out by promoting Niger's national interests and prioritising counterterrorism.

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