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

A FIRST LOOK

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This first InfoFlash in a series of two explores the latest developments in Niger and in the Sahel region in general.

On 26 July 2023, the military seized power in Niger. General Abdourahamane Tchiani, leader of the Presidential Guard, declared himself head of state, completing the second coup d'état that the country has seen in the last decade, and the fifth since its independence. Four days later, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) issued a one-week ultimatum to the junta: they demanded that President Mohamed Bazoum be restored to power, threatening to impose sanctions and to “use military force in Niger if necessary” (Raube, 2023). Although the junta promptly rejected ECOWAS’ demands, there has yet to be any military intervention; sanctions, however, were imposed, and include the suspension of all commercial transactions with Niger and of all financial assistance with regional development banks, as well as the freezing of Niger’s state assets in the Central Bank of West African States and state enterprises in commercial banks (Felix & Miridzhanian, 2023). Additionally, as a result of ECOWAS’ threat to invade Niger, on 16 September, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger signed a mutual defence pact—the Liptako-Gourma Charter—establishing the Alliance of Sahel States (Le Monde with AFP, 2023).

The legitimacy of the junta’s leadership has not been acknowledged by either France or the international community at large. As a result, France refused a meeting with the new foreign minister, exacerbating already existing tensions with Niger’s ex-colonial power (Balima & Aksar, 2023). On 25 August, in fact, the junta issued their own ultimatum to France to evacuate French Ambassador Sylvain Itte within 48 hours (Guardian staff and agencies, 2023). Relations between the two countries had already been strained, but between the coup and the ultimatum—which Paris initially refused to give in to—French President Emanuel Macron announced on 24 September that Ambassador Itte would be repatriated and that France’s 1,500 troops would withdraw by the end of the year, with withdrawal operations starting on 5 October (De La Hamaide & Lough, 2023).

1. A Small Map of Niger

The colony of Niger was established in 1922 by the French, having previously been a military territory from 1899 (Fuglestad, 1983). The country has an estimated population of 27.2 million (United Nations Population Fund, 2023). Although it is the world’s seventh biggest producer of uranium (McAllister, 2023), it is one of the world’s poorest countries and is ranked third to last in the UN’s Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

Niger’s history, both colonial and that from its independence to the present is one of continued conflict and insecurity: rebellions have plagued the country (e.g. the Tuareg uprising of 1916–17) as well as severe drought and famine, most notably in the 1970s (Fuglestad, 2008). Since 1960, there have been five coups, as well as an attempted coup in 2021. Endemic poverty and malnutrition have reigned, as has, in the last decade, the ever-increasing jihadist threat; nonetheless, from April 2021 to July 2023, Niger has had a democratic government, led by President Mohamed Bazoum. It is for this reason that just a few months prior to the coup, Anthony Blinken, the US’s Secretary of State, described Niger as “a model of resilience” (Gavin, 2023).

Moreover, as reported by Euractiv, according to a European External Action Service (EEAS) internal memo, the coup in Niger “surprised many observers at first because Niger was on a relatively linear political, economic and social trajectory, despite significant security pressure on all of its borders” (Brzozowski et al., 2023).

2. Today

In the last ten years, political instability and a rocky security environment have plagued Central Sahel; Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—all former French colonies—have seen a succession of military coups, increased jihadist threats, and recurrent inter-communal and ethnic violence. The former two underwent two coups each between 2020 and 2022, with Burkina Faso claiming to have foiled an attempted coup on 27 September 2023 (Muia & Ochieng, 2023). These three states face distinct challenges, but they “also share a legacy of structural vulnerabilities, weak governance, limited state presence and porous borders” (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2023).

The latest wave of violence started in 2012 in Mali and has since spread to Burkina Faso as well as Niger. Now, the deposition of President Bazoum has created “a stretch of military regimes from Guinea’s Atlantic coast to Sudan’s Red Sea ports” (Gavin, 2023).

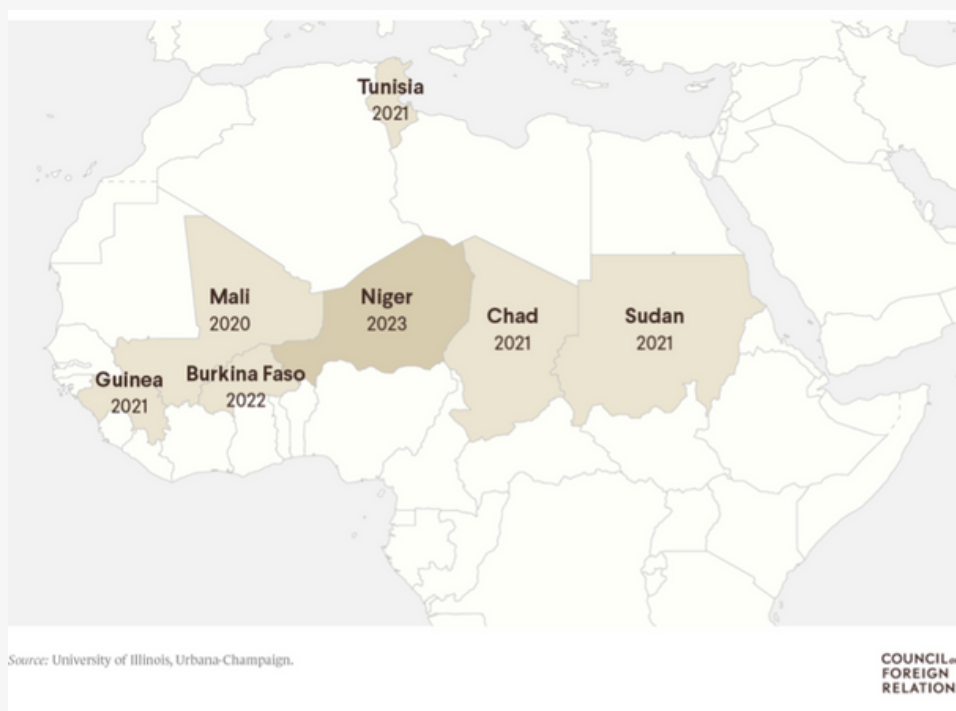


Figure 1: African countries which have experienced successful coups d'état since 2020 (Ferragamo, 2023)

Following the July coup, the international community, and more to the point France, refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the military junta's government (Jones, 2023). Resentment for ex-colonial powers is nothing new in the region, but although the country has been independent for well-nigh 70 years, France has maintained a certain presence in Niger, as well as its neighbours Mali and Burkina Faso. Ibrahima Kane, a qualified human rights lawyer in both Senegal and France and Special adviser to the Executive Director of the Open Society Foundation-Africa, recently stated that "[t]here is a feeling in Francophone African countries that the French always sided with the people in power, regardless of whether they were popular [...]. There is always a very strong connection between France and the government who, in many situations, are not very friendly with their own population" (Kaledzi, 2023), and have rarely done much to improve the average citizen's life. In fact, following the coup, thousands of Nigeriens rejoiced and celebrated in the streets of Niamey, signifying their discontent with democratically elected governments (Kaledzi, 2023).

Ovigwe Eguegu, a governance analyst from Nigeria, explains: "Why should they just engage in the exercise of voting and nothing changes? For them, the [coups] are seen as a way to shock the system to see if that could lead to a much better outcome" (Kaledzi, 2023). Not only that, but if a population feels that a given ex-colonial power does not address their struggles, and at the same time profits from the exploitation of their natural resources—20.2% of France's uranium imports in 2022 came from Niger (Ferrer Breda, 2023)—it is only natural for anti-government sentiment to increase.

At a protest outside a Niamey military base housing French troops, Imam Abdoulaziz Abdoulaye Amadou stated that "[j]ust as a divorce between a man and a woman takes time, so too will Niger's divorce from France" (Jones, 2023). Many Nigeriens believe that the coup is a means to free the country from the yoke of French influence, and that once Niger is stable enough, "a better civilian government [...] will lead Niger to its destiny" (Jones, 2023), as Adama Zourkaleini Maiga put it.

However, nothing is ever as simple as that. Idrissa Waziri, one of President Bazoum's former spokespersons, reminds us that "[i]n the fight against the terrorists, France is a key partner that provides most of the intelligence that helps us beat the terrorists," and that "the rushed departure of the French has led to a deterioration of the security situation in Mali and Burkina Faso. France nowadays has become a scapegoat to get people out on the street, blaming it for all our problems. France is not the problem, the problem today is this attempted coup which is a significant step backward for Niger" (Jones, 2023).

Furthermore, despite the post-coup junta's assertion of its dedication to ongoing counterterrorism efforts, Macron maintains a sceptical perspective on the matter (Takambou, 2023). Whatever the case, France's departure from the country, and the West's wariness in dealing with the junta might have grave consequences on the fight against violent extremism, to the point where Nigerian Sahel specialist Kabir Adamu said that "We could potentially see a repetition of what happened in Afghanistan. There are large swaths of land that are being dominated by these non-state armed groups. It's extremely worrisome" (Takambou, 2023).

Most recently, on 3 October 2023, 29 Nigerien soldiers were killed by jihadists using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and kamikaze vehicles (Muia, 2023). This is just one example of a rising number of jihadist attacks, which experts trace back to the power vacuum left by much of the West's withdrawal of support from the region; the same surge in violence is being felt in Mali and Burkina Faso, where coups recently put a military government in power and from which French troops were also booted.

Whether with or without the EU's, the US', or any single state's help, it is clear that Niger is hungry for change, as many feel that neither Western-style democracy nor Western foreign aid has had much positive effect on their lives, both from an economic and security point of view (Kaledzi, 2023). But can Niger stand on its own? Or will it, like its neighbour Mali, turn to Russia's Wagner group for support vis-à-vis the jihadist threat?

Until mid 2023, Niger was seen as one of the last bulwarks of democracy in the Sahel; Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, called it an "essential partner" of the EU just weeks before the coup (Thaidigsmann, 2023). Not only that, but Niger has been an important point of reference and base for the fight against international jihadism (De La Hamaide & Lough, 2023), including al-Qaeda and its affiliated militants, as well as Islamic State armed groups and illegal migration (see below, EUCAP Sahel Niger). Therefore, it was considered a key security partner by both the US and France, as well as by the general West. Beyond the shock to the country itself, this coup promises to create nothing short of a security crisis in central Sahel; according to the United Nations, the rising insecurity in the region poses a "global threat" (Kaledzi, 2023). Now, the West—the EU, Italy, France, and the US—finds itself in a positively disadvantageous position as national and EU missions to Niger have been put in peril and humanitarian disaster reigns. EU Watch's Michael Thaidigsmann eloquently described the EU's dilemma: "Either it continues its humanitarian support and willingly or unwillingly helps to shore up the regimes in power, or it withdraws its support and risks not only chaos and instability, but also other players like Russia to gain influence" (Thaidigsmann, 2023).

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