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Niger, ECOWAS and the future of the Sahel

Background

The storm clouds of war loom ominously over the bleak landscape of the Sahel. For more than a generation, the region's people had to endure coups, ethnic conflict, civil wars, terrorism, drug trafficking, human smuggling, and omnipresent foreign intervention. But, even by the Sahel's troubling standards, the [coup in Niger on 26 July 2023](#) which saw the toppling of President Mohamed Barzoum suggests the regional conflagration is about to get much worse.

Discussion

So, what makes the coup in Niger so different from coups elsewhere in the region. First, it is Niger's strategic importance for several players that draws attention. In 2022 alone, France imported almost [18000 tons of uranium from Niger](#) to power its nuclear plants. The announcement by the junta to stop uranium exports to Paris undermines French energy security. Second, given the 2022 [attack on the Nord Stream gas](#) pipeline in the Baltic Sea, there is also a US\$ 13 billion gas pipeline bringing in [gas from Nigeria via Niger and Morocco to Europe](#). This pipeline and the energy security of Europe within the context of the Russian-Ukraine war are now in some jeopardy. In response, Washington deployed its acting Deputy Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland to Niamey to meet with the military junta [in an effort to reverse the coup](#). Nothing of consequence came out of this meeting. French President Macron, meanwhile, made clear his country's stance – [threatening a swift response](#) to any threat to French interests. Meanwhile, the military junta has called on Russia's Wagner group for assistance, whilst Moscow has warned the 15-bloc Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) [not to engage in military intervention in Niger](#). In this sense, it is clear that the West and Russia's new Cold War has spilled over onto African soil in a proxy war mode.

Third, Niger has become the frontline of the West's fight against Islamist extremists across the Sahel. When Mali's military junta came to power and wanted French forces out, these relocated to Niger where France sought to further conduct its counter-terrorism campaign in the Sahel from Niger. Following Niger's coup, the demand was repeated – that French forces leave. Indeed, the military junta has informed Paris that it was scrapping all military cooperation agreements with the French armed forces. [The US is in a similar situation](#). They have a large drone air base in Agadez in Niger, called Niger Air Base 201. After Djibouti, Niger Air Base 201 is Washington's second largest base in Africa. Should US and French troops leave, this could well create a vacuum for jihadists to operate more freely in the region. This threat brings to the fore the question of who must respond and brings regional politics to the fore.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is currently chaired by newly-elected Nigerian President Bola Tinubu. There have been five coups in less than three years in the region and the West African bloc's own credibility is on the line. Ideally, they need to move decisively to end the reign of the junta in Niamey. However, there are mixed signals from ECOWAS. On the one hand they are attempting to engage in a dialogue with the junta, but on the other hand, they have cut off electricity to Niger, are imposing sanctions and speaking about a freezing of the junta leadership's assets. Simultaneously, they are also talking about [military intervention](#). General Abdourahman Tchiani, the coup leader has remained unmoved by ECOWAS' pleas and threats. ECOWAS set a deadline of 6 August 2023 for a return to constitutional order in Niger. This deadline passed whilst ECOWAS continued to send mixed signals – between appeasement and threats of military force. Meanwhile, President Barzoum remains in custody, the junta has closed Niger's airspace to all flights and the coup leaders have announced a new interim government consisting of 21 ministers.

What could account for these mixed signals emanating from ECOWAS? First, ECOWAS leaders fear a wider regional conflict. The military juntas of both [Burkina Faso and Mali have pledged their support to Niger's coup leaders](#) stating that an attack on Niamey would be tantamount to an attack on them. Second, ECOWAS leaders realize that their own restive populations may not be in support of military action in Niger. Nigeria's Senate, for instance, has [rejected its president's plan](#) to deploy troops to Niger. Third, there is the question of the costs of the intervention. A force of 5,000 troops is estimated [to cost ECOWAS US\\$ 2.3 billion per annum](#). Who will pay for this? Will a force of 5,000 be sufficient for one of Africa's largest countries consisting of 1,267,000 square kilometres? To be clear, such a force would be expected to not only remove the current military junta but also hold territory. This is clearly impossible for a force of a mere 5,000 troops. Further muddying the waters of uncertainty is that there is no clear indication of how much support the junta has amongst the local population. Such information is crucial for any intervening force. If the junta has popular support, it suggests the intervening force may well have to fight a counter-insurgency campaign for some years to come. What is clear is that the junta's anti-French rhetoric has immense resonance amongst the populace who have nothing but antipathy towards their erstwhile colonial masters and who keep protesting and [attacking the French embassy in Niamey](#).

Whilst the storm clouds of conflict continue to gather, there was a glimmer of hope for peace, for constructive dialogue and diplomacy when the former Nigerian Central Bank Governor, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi travelled to Niamey to meet with General Tchiani. Unlike other ECOWAS envoys who were not given an opportunity to meet with the general, he was accorded this opportunity. Sanusi is highly influential, not only as the 14th Emir of Kano but he is also the leader of the Tijaniyya Islamic sect which also has many adherents in Niger. Following [the meeting](#), which seemed very constructive, the coup leaders wanted an end to sanctions and restoration of electricity to Niger (which suggests ECOWAS may have some leverage over the junta). Sanusi, meanwhile, unlike Western states and ECOWAS who called for a return of power to President Barzoum, was more conciliatory and suggested engaging all sectors of Nigerien society to collectively chart a way forward towards a return to constitutional order.

Concluding remarks

Despite the attempts by Mr Sanusi, the coup in Niger as explained above is not a wholly Nigerien matter. What of France's access to Niger's uranium? What of the gas pipeline running through Niger to Europe? What of the presence of US and French troops in Niger? What of the junta's invitation to the Wagner group? Given these issues, and with time fast running out, the prospect for further conflict is sadly more probable than peace.

Further Reading:

Fact sheet: Military coup in Niger. 3 August 2023. <https://acleddata.com/2023/08/03/fact-sheet-military-coup-in-niger/> (accessed 14 August 2023.)

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