



Niger Military Coup

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by Joshua Perkins *

Background

- The Sahel region of Africa has the fastest growing population in the world. Poverty, food crisis, and armed conflict threaten the area as the number of refugees of internally displaced people reaches [over 4.1 million](#).
- The conflict in Ukraine exacerbates the food crisis in the Sahel region. Russia recently held a Russia-Africa summit where Putin promised to [give 6 countries from Africa free grain](#), to include Mali and Burkina Faso. This comes following Russia's termination of the Black Sea grain deal, which provided 725,000 tons of grain to numerous countries. Russia's offer of free grain for limited countries can be seen as an effort to capitalize on and to curry favor with an already unstable region. Following the French troops withdrawal from Mali, an estimated [1,000 Wagner PMC](#) troops filled the void, furthering Moscow's regional influence.
- In 2013, the French military launched Operation Serval [to counter jihadist activity](#) in Northern Mali. This operation evolved into the longer lasting Operation Barkhane in August of 2014, which ended in 2022. The impacts of the counter jihadist operations strike a familiarity with US-led counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. Both operations started with high rates of initial successes but resulted in long conflicts with local security forces unprepared to meet the challenge at hand. The withdrawal of French forces has resulted in instability in the region amidst increasing civilian casualties, with numbers nearly [doubling from 2020 to 2021](#).
- [In August 2020 and May 2021](#), Mali witnessed two military coups. The US and France have contributed with millions of dollars for counterterrorism efforts to Mali, which resulted in Mali's military spending [doubling from 2012 figures](#) but other government functions remained weak. Aid from [international actors](#) must focus their support toward regional governance in order for Mali to stabilize.
- In January and later September of 2020, Burkina Faso was scene to [two coups](#). Lt Col. Damiba held the first position of power, which was taken by Captain Ibrahim Traore later in 2022. Burkina Faso has spent nearly 80% of its 63 years of independence under military rule. There is a plan to transition to civilian power in 2024, but to ensure that the [government stabilizes, focus needs to be given to local communities'](#) involvement in the decision-making process.
- On July 26, 2023, Niger experienced a coup. Since the original deadline of August 6 midnight to reinstate the democratically elected president has passed, leaders of ECOWAS have reconvened to discuss future actions in response to the coup in Niger. A decision was reached to [deploy a standby force](#) to the border of Niger if military action was to be pursued. Ivory Coast plans to commit about 850 – 1,100 troops to the force with Nigeria, Benin, and others contributing also. In defiance of ECOWAS, the military junta of Niger have created a new government with a prime minister and a military council.

Introduction

On July 26, 2023, Niger experienced a coup led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani, the head of the presidential guard. The democratically elected president of Niger, Mohamed Bazoum, has been detained since that day.

International condemnation has ensued following the coup. The US decided to pause foreign aid to Niger but emphasized that [humanitarian and US personnel](#) aid would continue to be given.

Following the coup, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has imposed sanctions on Niger. The effects of such sanctions can be devastating as [45% of funding](#) for the country comes from abroad.

Furthermore, ECOWAS has made demands for President Bazoum to be reinstated. A deadline of August 6 at midnight was given but the military junta has failed to comply with the demands. With the deadline having passed, military intervention is being considered using a "standby force." With Ivory Coast, Niger, and other countries contributing to the force, Mali and Burkina Faso reaffirm their stance that military intervention into Niger would be a [declaration of war](#) on all three countries.

[International support for ECOWAS](#) was given from two of the region's biggest partners, the U.S. and France. The United States emphasized its support for a non-violent course of action which would bring back the deposed president. France has expressed its full support for ECOWAS. Another [economic bloc, ECCAS](#), has given its full support to ECOWAS in its efforts to restore democracy.

Niger: The Sahel region's next domino?

Military leaders have met in Nigeria to discuss plans for action against the usurpers in Niger. Military action will

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be considered as a [last resort](#), according to ECOWAS defense chiefs. Nonetheless, a potential military operation is not supported unanimously from those inside and outside of ECOWAS. Algeria and Chad have expressed their concerns of a broader regional war. Likewise, within Nigeria there are doubts [about the effectiveness of military action](#).

In the meantime, Nigeria has responded by cutting power supply to Niger. This has resulted in blackouts for the country under coup. Other measures include sanctions from ECOWAS, the suspension of imports and exports of goods, [banks closing](#), and food prices inflating. General Tchiani is using these actions imposed against the country as fuel to the fire against a wider anti-west sentiment.

The issue of insurgencies also complicates the situation. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have seen an expansion of insurgency activity since 2013, when France began conducting counter jihadist operations in the Sahel region. The operations resulted in France withdrawing troops from Mali and setting up future operations in Niger with 1,500 troops.

Relationships between Mali and France have deteriorated since France moved its troops to Niger. Since then, anti-France sentiment has taken root and mass demonstrations have occurred in opposition of Paris. While anti-France sentiment may be organic, current coup government leaders use the resentment to [legitimize their power](#).

Likewise, Burkina Faso has seen a withdrawal of French troops amidst a growing jihadist insurgency in the country. Approximately [40% of the country](#) is under the control of extremist groups. Following the departure of French forces, the military leader has acknowledged Russia as a [strategic ally](#) and will continue to receive major weapon shipments from them. Suspicions were cast that Wagner would move into Burkina Faso, as it did in Mali, but the military leader remains adamant that they fight alone.

A pattern is emerging in the Sahel region with Niger this time falling under control of coupists in the past 3 years. Just as in the other regional examples, the coup was followed by explanations featuring strong anti-French and, more broadly, anti-West rhetoric. Showcasing their commitment to coup and to solve their problems without international intervention, Niger has [revoked an agreement with France](#) to maintain troops in the country.

Another major gain at stake is the strong [US military presence](#) in the country that started to build up since February 2013 to curb expansion of jihadi terrorist organizations into Chad and Gulf of Guinea. Extending over three drone bases with a total of 1100 troops, an order of leaving of American troops would create a security vacuum that would reverse a decade-long gains in countering militant groups and mean no longer training Niger soldiers.

Facing a potential military intervention by ECOWAS, the military junta has sought out aid from PMC Wagner forces to fill a possible security vacuum. The head of Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, [has signaled his support of the coup](#) and offered to provide some assistance.

Sadly, making bedfellows with Wagner PMC will do little to increase stability of the region. After French forces left Mali, Wagner filled the void in providing security. In May 2023, reports have circulated about Wagner forces committing atrocities, [to include torture](#), of civilians in Mali.

Political Violence in Central Sahel

1 January 2018 - 28 July 2023

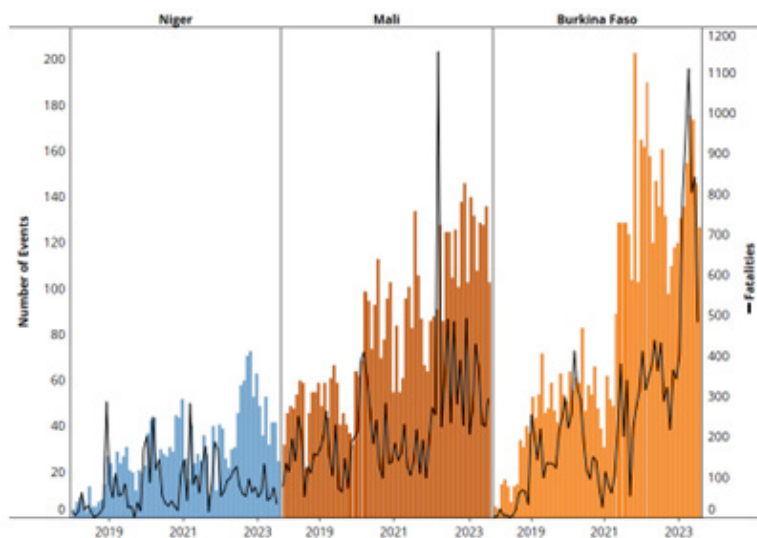


Figure 1: Source [ACLE](#)

Wagner's tactics are indiscriminate and often result in high casualties of civilians. For instance, Wagner forces in the Central African Republic have been linked to [70% of battles](#) over mining sites. These attacks have resulted in numerous civilian casualties, with one such attack leaving 42 dead, many of which were civilians. Wagner operations in Mali reveal a worse reality. According to ACLED reporting, [upwards of 69%](#) of all Wagner operations result in civilian targeting.

Compared to the violence in Mali and Burkina Faso, the situation in Niger has seen a recent downward trend of civilian targeting by almost 50% in the past six months. As a result of this decrease, there was a decrease in [civilian deaths by 16%](#). While

counterinsurgent operations have recently increased in Niger, it has done so without an increase in civilian violence. Unlike its neighbors, Niger is faring better in the fight against insurgencies.

Based on the past conduct of Wagner forces in Africa, inviting the private military company into Niger will not improve the security circumstances. Wagner PMC has a pattern of violence against civilians and seizure of resources from the country. Additionally, the price to pay for Wagner security is alleged to be [\\$10 million a month](#), a costly amount for a country presently reeling from sanctions.

Beyond the possible involvement of Wagner forces in Niger and the prospect of military operation against the military junta, the stakes of military intervention have been raised. Fellow ousted countries, Mali and Burkina Faso, stated that military action would be considered an [act of war](#) and offered their troops in solidarity to Niger.

The junta in Niger, despite calls from US, France and regional powers, has not reversed its decision to cede government to the former president. On the contrary, they have decided to [prosecute the deposed president](#) for treason. Besides, preparations against a contingent military intervention are underway such as concentration of more troops in the capital and [closing of the airspace](#). Furthermore, the military junta has created a new government establishing Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine as the [prime minister](#). The junta has also threatened to [kill President Bazoum](#) in case of a military intervention.

ECOWAS had led a [military force of 7,000](#) to the border of the Gambia as a show of force to Yahya Jammeh, who refused to step down from power after election in 2017. ECOWAS could be attempting a similar tactic with the use of the standby force. But it should be noted that Niger's military that has been for years trained by the US and French forces is far more superior than that of Gambia.

The size of the standby force has yet to be determined, but Ivory Coast is committing 850 - 1,100 soldiers. Nigeria has a fighting force of [over 220,000](#), a size that is 4 times larger than the military forces of Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger combined. However, while Nigeria has a greater military in terms of size and modern equipment in addition to a lengthy shared border, the country must deal with its internal security. [80% of the states](#) in Nigeria conduct counter insurgency operations against Boko Haram. This means that much of Nigeria's fighting power is actively tied up.

UN backing is being pursued by ECOWAS to legitimize their use of military action. In a previous statement, head of the UN Office in West Africa and the Sahel, Leonardo Santos Simao, has expressed his hopes that [military action would not be pursued](#). In addition, Mr. Simao has stated ECOWAS retains the power to determine what course of action is best. While it seems that the UN Security Council has defaulted to regional authority for the matter, the African Union's Peace and Security Council has decided they are [opposed to military intervention](#).

On Saturday August 19, ECOWAS delegation went to the capital of Niger and talked with the military junta. The delegates also managed to meet with the deposed president, marking the first time since the coup this has happened. Following the meeting, General Tchiani announced that civilian order would be [restored in three years](#). This is the first successful diplomatic talk with the military junta since the coup and it signals a potential for future development.

Conclusion

Proposed military action risks a greater conflict in the Sahel region. Many nations are opposed to the use of force and the AU Peace and Security Council likewise opposes military intervention. With Niger receiving the backing of Mali and Burkina Faso, the stakes are raised to regional war. The impacts of such conflict would leave even more displaced in a region that already has 4.1.

Furthermore, there are complications of using a military force to bring about democracy. While the region has faced numerous coups in recent years, this type of action could send the wrong message and ultimately fail to stabilize regional governments.

Finally, insurgencies have been overtaking the countries in the Sahel. Continued conflict only increases the likelihood of insurgents becoming active in new areas. Wagner's presence in the region is increasingly sought after as a fighting force against insurgencies. The results of such a partnership would lead to more violence against civilians.

Fortunately, diplomatic efforts with a delegation from ECOWAS resulted in a meeting with the military junta, as well as a separate meeting with the deposed president. Following the meeting, General Tchiani announced a planned transition back to civilian power in three years. This may signal the beginning of continued talks between ECOWAS and the military junta. While diplomatic options remain viable, they should be the primary course of action.