



Watch List 2023 for the EU

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By the International Crisis Group

Niger: Containing the Fallout from the Coup

West Africa has witnessed yet another coup, this time in Niger. In this excerpt from the [Watch List 2023 – Autumn Update](#), Crisis Group encourages the EU and its member states to support regional efforts to de-escalate tensions with the Nigerien junta.

A [26 July coup in Niger](#) has upended alliances in West Africa and struck another in a succession of blows to democratic principles in the region. After military takeovers in Mali and Burkina Faso in 2021 and 2022, the European Union, the U.S. and other allies of Sahelian states had pinned their hopes on Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum as a guarantor of stability and a bulwark of sensible civilian governance. Whereas Islamist militants are stepping up a campaign of violence in Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger had largely contained jihadist activities over the last two years. Bazoum had developed a security policy that included non-military initiatives such as engagement with repentant militants, while also forging closer ties with the U.S. and French militaries. But despite Bazoum's track record, those who helped him ascend to power in 2021 did not protect him when General Abdourahamane Tiani, head of the presidential guard, staged a putsch, apparently fearing that he was about to be removed from his position.

As the junta consolidates its power, a geopolitical drama is unfolding. Niger's donors, neighbours and security partners are divided over how to work with the country's new

military leadership. France has withdrawn its ambassador after a bitter standoff and will pull its 1,500 troops out of Niger by the end of the year. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), reeling from the instability caused by the military takeovers in Mali and Burkina Faso, has imposed harsh sanctions – freezing all commercial and financial transactions between its member states and Niger, including electricity exports. The EU has thus far backed ECOWAS in its demand that Bazoum be reinstated. While some EU member states increasingly favour a less hardline approach, France does not, limiting the EU's ability to make inroads with the junta. By contrast, the U.S. has kept channels of communications open with military officers in order to preserve its foothold in the country and outmanoeuvre Russia. China, meanwhile, is primarily interested in protecting its oil blocks.

The stakes are high. Prospects for resolving the security crisis sweeping the Sahel are dim. Niger's economy is suffering and the people as well. As they struggle to reconcile democracy promotion with security and humanitarian considerations, the EU and its member states should:

- Encourage ECOWAS, for example through its member state Nigeria, to pursue dialogue with Niger’s junta. Though the spate of coups in West Africa has understandably fed a fear of contagion, there is a need for de-escalation.
- In discussions with the junta, push for a civilian-led transition that brings together representatives of the military, political parties and civil society organisations, including women’s groups; and, together with ECOWAS, discreetly support civilian groups that can advocate for accountable governance and an eventual return to constitutional order.
- Ensure that development and humanitarian aid continues to reach those most in need, such as displaced persons and children. EU member states should remind all sides – the junta as well as ECOWAS countries – of the need to guarantee unimpeded access for humanitarian workers delivering aid. Another step could be to push ECOWAS to exempt essential commodities such as medicines, fuel and electricity from the sanctions regime.
- In the medium to long term, face the challenge presented by the crisis by evaluating whether Europe’s emphasis on security cooperation in the Sahel has been effective, or whether it would be better served by an approach that focuses more on good governance and economic development.

The Junta Digs In

The coup in Niamey has done severe damage to regional cooperation. Motivated by security concerns and fears of coup contagion, many of Niger’s southern neighbours as well as its Western partners have taken a tough stance against the junta. ECOWAS has levied significant financial and economic sanctions and threatened to intervene militarily if negotiations to reinstate Bazoum hit a dead end. A military intervention appears unlikely, however – especially since senators from Nigeria’s northern states have urged President Bola Tinubu to “[use political and diplomatic means](#)” to resolve the crisis rather than send soldiers to Niger. Those countries that favour an intervention – Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Senegal – are unlikely to proceed without Nigeria’s participation.

In any event, most observers agree that such an intervention would prove disastrous for Niger. The security forces and many of the capital’s residents appear to back the junta, and an armed conflict could lead to civilian casualties. On 15 September, Mali and Burkina Faso, both of which have experienced two coups over the past three years, signed a mutual defence

pact with Niger’s military rulers, pledging to help one another fight jihadism and ward off “external aggression”. It is unclear how much military assistance either country could actually provide the Nigerien junta, should the accord be put to the test, as both have their hands full trying to contain Islamist insurgencies. But any involvement on their part would contribute to regional chaos. Moreover, a military intervention will undermine ECOWAS itself, particularly if the junta (as well as opposition politicians in ECOWAS member states) keeps harping on the notion that the bloc is being manipulated by France, the former colonial power in much of the Sahel.

Meanwhile, the situation in Niger is increasingly grim. The country suffers chronic food insecurity, due to floods and droughts, among other things. ECOWAS sanctions have disrupted Niger’s food imports, triggering a spike in prices for basic commodities. The landlocked state brings in most of its imports by road, particularly from Benin and Nigeria. The sanctions have largely put a halt to this trade, as well as to electricity supplies from Nigeria,

which was meeting over two thirds of domestic demand. Pharmacies are running out of stock and hospitals are struggling to cool vaccines for infants. On top of that, the EU has frozen over €500 million in financial support and security aid, leaving Niamey with a shrunken budget and uncertainty about promised military assistance. Niger's \$14 billion economy depends heavily on foreign support; external partners were to supply 48 per cent of the state's budget for 2023. Nigerien authorities have also leaned on international organisations to help provide basic services in rural zones and care for the estimated 700,000 displaced in the country.

The junta refuses to budge, however, capitalising on the hardship to rally public support for its power grab. Its recent decisions have made matters worse. Although humanitarian assistance is exempt from ECOWAS sanctions, Niamey has blocked aid from entering through Benin on the grounds that the latter supports a military intervention, telling NGOs to send their convoys through its ally Burkina Faso instead. Moreover, in late August, the junta further restricted UN agencies and international NGOs from working independently, which has constrained their capacity to deliver assistance.

Hard Security Choices

The coup in Niger darkens an already bleak picture in the Sahel. Mali is inching toward all-out war with armed separatists in the north, where two jihadist groups, Islamic State Sahel Province and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, are also fighting over territory. Jihadists are active in much of rural Burkina Faso, while the country's military leadership is distributing arms to civilians to defend towns and villages.

In contrast to its neighbours, Niger had better contained jihadist attacks over the past two years. Before the coup, even the military attributed Niger's resilience partly to Bazoum's policies, which included the government's willingness to speak with jihadists, the disarmament and social reintegration of repentant militants, and the gradual absorption of vigilante self-defence groups into the security forces. The junta will likely halt those initiatives, which it regards as undermining the status of career soldiers. Still, at present, it is unclear what the officers' priorities will be.

As for Western security cooperation, it is in disarray. The junta has shored up its credentials by tapping into anti-French sentiment and demanding that France remove its 1,500 troops from the country. French President Emmanuel Macron's lengthy standoff with the junta

hindered other EU member states from articulating a path forward on how to engage with authorities. On 24 September, France finally said it would pull out by year's end, closing the book on its stabilisation strategy for the Sahel. Its ambassador left the country three days later.

Unlike France, and despite years of French-U.S. military cooperation in the region, the U.S. took a cautious approach. It did not immediately label the military takeover a coup, although it appears to be applying coup-linked restrictions under U.S. law nonetheless, and has not recognised the junta as the legitimate government. With 1,100 troops in the country, it has suspended most economic and military aid and security cooperation but [resumed drone flights](#) to collect intelligence from a base it has built near the city of Agadez following discussions with senior junta officials, some of whom are U.S.-trained. Washington continues to deliberate over whether it will maintain a military presence in Niger following France's withdrawal.

That leaves the EU facing difficult choices. The bloc saw Niger as a key ally in matters affecting not only the region's security but also its own, including narcotics trafficking and migration. In July 2022, the bloc committed

€70 million under the European Peace Facility (EPF) for the Nigerien armed forces, though it has disbursed little of this sum to date. Just one month before the coup, **in June**, Brussels agreed to provide lethal aid such as ammunition to Niger, the first time it would have used the EPF for such purposes other than for Ukraine. It also established an EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger in February. All these plans now hang in the balance, while France's uncompromising approach to the junta, which is consistent with democratic principles, has as a practical matter slowed down EU efforts to have a forward-looking discussion on how to engage with Nigerien authorities. Other member states have, however, begun cautious talks with Niger's new prime minister, Ali Lamine Zeine, an economist.

Talks may not be enough to guarantee a

lasting security partnership with the junta given all the impediments – including its alignment with the Malian and Burkinabe transitional authorities, both of whom are on friendly terms with Russia – but that should not be the EU's primary aim in any case. If the EU and member states want a stable foundation for cooperation with Niamey, and to keep Niger from following Mali and Burkina Faso down the path of implosion, then their priority should be to emphasise the need for a civilian-led transition. In this regard, they are most likely to be successful if they work with and through ECOWAS to deliver this message. Some flexibility on the part of all outside actors – the EU and ECOWAS included – will likely be necessary to develop functional working arrangements with the new authorities.

What the EU and its Member States Can Do

Although there are few good options, the EU and its member states can take several steps to prevent the crisis from deteriorating, and learn lessons from this recent episode.

First, Brussels should support ECOWAS in pursuing talks with the junta, paying particular attention to persuading those member states favouring a military intervention that a new tack is required. Though such an operation appears highly unlikely, given both the bloc's internal divides and the African Union's opposition, it bears reinforcing that an intervention could have destabilising consequences and an unclear outcome. The EU should press for diplomatic engagement instead. Because of its political and economic weight, Nigeria seems well positioned to take the lead in talks with Niamey, though there are other regional contenders, too. **Togo**, for instance, has openly stated its disapproval of military action and signalled its willingness to help facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to Niger. Secondly, the EU should make up for time lost

with France's no-compromise approach and figure out how to forge a productive relationship with Niger's junta in which it can push, primarily through ECOWAS, for a civilian-led transition that brings together representatives of the military, political parties and civil society organisations, including women's groups. Together with ECOWAS, the EU can start quietly supporting civilian groups that can play a role in the eventual return to constitutional order.

Thirdly, the EU, together with the UN, should encourage all sides to guarantee safe, unimpeded passage for humanitarian organisations delivering food and medicine to people in distress, taking into account the specific needs of displaced persons, women and children. The EU should also push ECOWAS to make exceptions for pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, petroleum products and electricity in its commercial and financial sanctions.

Finally, the coup should serve as a warning that the EU's security policies in the Sahel need

a rethink. Under Bazoum, Niger was on the right track, but its political system remained brittle and popular discontent with the ruling elites was growing. Seemingly solid security partnerships are vulnerable to falling apart in these circumstances, as Mali's example shows. While the EU will not be well served by severing

ties with Niger, the military takeover in Niamey should prompt discussions about Brussels' priorities for the region. It is high time for the EU to discuss whether its security focus should be sustained in the Sahel or whether a greater emphasis on governance and economic development may provide better results. ■