

# The Instability of the Sahel: a Military Coup in Niger - An Impetus for the Spread of Radical Islam in the Continent

Dr. David Doukhan  
August 2023

# About the ICT

---

The International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) is one of the leading academic institutes for counter-terrorism in the world. Using a multidisciplinary approach, the ICT work to facilitate international cooperation in the global struggle against terrorism.

As an independent think-do-tank, the ICT focuses on themes related to terrorism, counter-terrorism, homeland security, threat vulnerability, risk assessment, intelligence analysis, national security, and defense policy.

Serving as a joint forum for international policymakers and scholars, the ICT draws upon the experiences of a comprehensive and international network of individuals and organizations with unique expertise on terrorism and counter-terrorism research, public policy analysis and education.

In addition to publishing research papers, situation reports and academic publications for worldwide distribution, the ICT hosts a number of international seminars, workshops and conferences to discuss and educate followers on global and regional issues of security, defense, and public policy in order to better facilitate the exchange of perspectives, information and proposals for policy action.

## Licensing & Distribution

ICT publications are published in an open-access format and are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public License, which permits the non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

## The Instability of the Sahel: A Military Coup in Niger - An Impetus for the Spread of Radical Islam in the Continent

Dr. David Doukhan

---

Is the military coup in Niger a surprise? Definitely not. The people of Niger are not surprised that the military has burst into the political arena, specifically due to frustrations related to the deteriorating security situation.

Niger faces regular and deadly attacks from jihadist groups linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Sahel in the west, Boko Haram (Boko Haram) and the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP) affiliate in the southeast. To this must be added government corruption, governance that needs improvement and a host of internal problems arising from the internal being of the Nigerian people (about 26 million people).

Niger is heavily dependent on foreign aid. Niger is a landlocked country in the Sahel, bordering Mali, Libya and Nigeria - countries where radical Islam flourished and spread everywhere. Following the military coup, the 3 largest donors (Germany, USA and France) stopped/suspended financial aid to this country. On July 29, 2023. France announced the suspension of all aid operations (in 2021 it amounted to 125 million dollars) in development and budget support for Niger. After Germany (154 million euros in 2021), which followed and the USA (261 million euros) according to data from the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development).<sup>1</sup>

Niger is a gateway/crossing for migrants/refugees making the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Gangs of criminal smugglers and drug dealers may take advantage of the security crisis and promote their dubious businesses.

There is also the argument that it was a personal factor that undermined the situation in Niger. The tension between the incumbent president and the head of the presidential guard Tchiani was apparently the reason for the rebellion that led to the overthrow of the government.

This coup attempt is a blow to the West, who believed that Niger was a stable country. It is not for nothing that the multinational force headquarters of the Barkhane

---

<sup>1</sup> See the link: [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/geographical-distribution-of-financial-flows-to-developing-countries-2023\\_12757fab-en-fr#page3](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/geographical-distribution-of-financial-flows-to-developing-countries-2023_12757fab-en-fr#page3)

and Takuba forces were moved under French command to Niger after their expulsion from Mali. The leaders of the military junta in Niger announced the cancellation of a draft military cooperation agreement with France, effectively closing the door on the continuation of Niamey's partnership with the war waged by France against terrorist organizations in the Sahel region.<sup>2</sup> The junta also fired the previous government's ambassadors to France, the United States, Togo and neighboring Nigeria, which is leading efforts by the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, on dialogue.

The Americans also built military bases there, Niger was considered a pillar of the US regional strategy. About 1,110 American soldiers are stationed in the country, and the US Army established UAV bases there (Agadez)<sup>3</sup> at a cost of 110 million U.S. dollars.<sup>4</sup> France maintains two military bases in Niger: Dosso and Agali (France maintains between 1,500-2,000 fighters in Niger - some of the force it had, had to withdraw from neighboring Mali in 2022).<sup>5</sup> Niger is responsible for supplying 15% of the uranium for the nuclear reactors in France.<sup>6</sup>

If France is militarily present in Niger, it is because the legitimate authorities of Niger have requested the assistance of France in the fight against terrorism. This assistance took several forms: training, intelligence assistance but also combat support for the Nigerian command. This military cooperation, which has existed since 2019, began to yield significant results, especially around the three borders triangle (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger).

In fact, due to the military assistance, thousands of square kilometers had been returned to the population, mainly for the purposes of pastoralism and agricultural production. Conclusion: not only President Bazum was taken hostage, but in fact the en-

---

2 See the link: <https://www.voanews.com/a/niger-coup-leaders-revoke-military-agreements-talk-efforts-falter/7211501.html>

3 The 201st Air Base in Agadez is a surveillance center and the starting point of an archipelago of American outposts in West Africa. The base is home to Space Corps personnel, a joint special operations air division and a fleet of drones - including armed MQ-9 Reapers. The monthly maintenance cost of this base is between 20-30 million dollars. See the link: <https://theintercept.com/2023/07/26/niger-coup-us-military/>.

4 See the link: [https://www.voanews.com/a/africa\\_us-constructed-air-base-niger-begins-operations/6178666.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_us-constructed-air-base-niger-begins-operations/6178666.html) ; <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/29291/the-air-forces-new-base-in-niger-is-getting-a-major-addition-before-it-even-opens>

5 France has several permanent military bases in West Africa: 400 soldiers have been present in Dakar (Senegal) since 2011, providing training to soldiers from the countries of the region. In the Ivory Coast, an operational base including 900 soldiers has been established in Abidjan since 2012. About 350 French soldiers are also stationed in Gabon. Their strategic location makes it possible to support operations carried out in West and Central Africa. In Djibouti, as an essential transit station for moving forces towards the Indo-Pacific, the largest force is stationed at 1,500 fighters.

See the link: <https://www.leparisien.fr/international/crise-au-niger-quel-avenir-pour-les-bases-militaires-francaises-au-sahel-02-08-2023-YYGRLNLUGJHMRL5GQJLCXPZTRU.php>

6 For the supply of uranium, France depends mainly on Niger, Canada, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In the event of a supply disruption, in uranium as in gas, France has reserves. It has a stock for about ten years of consumption, either it is natural uranium, or it is processed uranium, that is, uranium that comes out of the reactors, but it can be reused. See the link: <https://www.europe1.fr/economie/nucleaire-dou-vient-luranium-qui-alimente-les-centrales-francaises-4152911>.

tire population of Niger.

This putsch weakens this fight against terrorism in the Sahelian region where armed terrorist groups experience a resurgence of activity. This is a grave error of judgment completely against the interests of the country.

Guinea (Conakry), like Burkina Faso and Mali, underwent a military coup in the last three years, and expressed support for the military junta in Niger, which they believe is better able to fight the Islamic Jihad than the elected government headed by Mohammed Bazoum. Furthermore, they announced that in the event of the use of military force against the military junta in Niger, they will see this as a declaration of war against them and they will defend Niger.

The illusion was that Niger is a very stable country that can stabilize other countries in the Sahel. Democratic elections were held there, and Mohammed Bazoum was legally elected while promising to fight the spread of radical Islam and governmental corruption.

Historically, Niger is a country beset by military coups. Since gaining independence in 1960, there have been five successful military coups and 3 attempts. The first was in April 1974, the army under the command of Seini Kountché against the incumbent president Diori. In 1996, another political shock rocked Niger when Lieutenant General Ibrahim Barra Maïnassara led a coup against President Ousmane and his Prime Minister Hama Amadou. The country thus experienced a new forced transition. Three years later, in 1999, another political tragedy occurred when President Barra Maïnassara was shot and killed by dissident soldiers at the airport in Niamey. It was Dauda Malam Wanke, the commander of the presidential guard, who took the reins of power before organizing the elections won by Mamadou Tandja in 2000. The last coup took place in February 2010, toppling the self-appointed President Mamadou Tandja in a coup d'état. In 1999 it was General Salo Djibo who deposed him. In addition to these coups, there were attempts between 2011 and 2021. The latest attempt began on March 31, 2021. The date when officers tried to overthrow Muhammad Issoufou, just two days before the inauguration of President Muhammad Bazoum. On July 26, General Abdul Rahman Tchiani seized the reins of power in a military coup.

By all accounts, it has an impressive history of military coups. Some believe that this resurgence of coups in Niger is explained by the lack of a democratic culture. Military coups are symptomatic of dysfunction in the democratic process, hence the need to strengthen state institutions, including the army. The interest in the recent military coup in Niger, which severely shook the structure, which is obviously unstable in the Sahel, mainly in the context of the attempts to curb the spread of radical Islamic organizations in the given area and their migration towards the countries of the Gulf of

## Guinea.

A close look at the map of Africa shows five separate regions where the extremist Islamic organizations have established themselves and where they are active. Each of these areas has characteristics and a dynamic development of the conflict. The areas are:

### The border triangle (Tri-Border)

The border triangle covers parts of northern Mali and the region of Burkina Faso and Niger known as Liptako-Gourma. This area, formerly controlled by local agricultural populations mainly from the Fulani tribe but also from the Tuareg and Gourma peoples - is the focus of violence in the Sahel. There are also remnants of the Burkinabe Group under the command of Malam Ibrahim Dicko, Ansaroul Islam, who are fighting under the banner of the 'Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin' coalition (JNIM-Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin). Others align with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

### North Central Burkina Faso

This region is experiencing one of the fastest escalations of violence in the Sahel. Macina Liberation Front (FLM) or Katibat Macina militants who are part of the JNIM coalition operate there, along with remnants of the Ansaroul Islam organization. This is an area rich in gold deposits, a fact that explains the influx of Islamic organizations to it.

### Central Mali

Since 2015 Central Mali is the stronghold of the 'Front for the Liberation of Messina' the FLM. The organization is headed by the extremist preacher Amado Kouffa. The extreme violence of the FLM is directly responsible for the insecurity in Mali from the more remote northern regions to the central districts of Bandiagara, Bankass, Djenné, Douentza, Koro, Mopti (almost 2 million inhabitants). 4) Southeast and Southwest Burkina Faso - almost all incidents in southeast and southwest Burkina Faso are attributed to militant groups associated with JNIM. The long history of militants associated with the JNIM shows the cooperation of criminal networks, smuggling and trafficking throughout West Africa.

### Western Niger

ISGS was the main militant Islamic group trying to take advantage of Niger's border meeting with Mali and Burkina Faso to expand its influence on remote communities. Militant Islamic violence in Niger represents less than 10% of the total violence in the Sahel.

These five regions encompass over 70% of the militant Islamist violence in the Sahel. The recent military coup in Niger created in the Sahel region, the longest corridor in the world of military regimes (military juntas), and it stretches across six countries (about 5,600 km) from Guinea (Conakry) in the west of the continent to Sudan in the east. In all countries, except one, there have been military coups in the last two years. The Sahel has overtaken the Middle East and South Asia to become the global epicenter of jihadist Islamic violence. According to the Global Terrorism Index, in 2022, 43% of all 6,701 deaths from jihadist Islamic terrorism were recorded in the Sahel, compared to a rate of only 1% in 2007.<sup>7</sup>

### Russia's role

The sight of Russian flags waved by coup supporters in Niamey last week was reminiscent of similar sightings in Burkina Faso last year. The waving of the Russian flags does not necessarily indicate that Russia is behind the military coup in Niger, but it symbolizes the way Russia has positioned itself in recent years in this part of Africa as the bearer of the torch against the West, especially against France, which was the colonial power that previously ruled Niger and as the leader of the European anti-Russian line in everything related to the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. From the point of view of official Russia and the executor in the field of Yevgeny Prigozhin's 'Wagner force', they propose to free African countries from 'colonialism and neo-colonialism'. This is at a time when the Russian mercenaries from the 'Wagner Force' (their number is estimated at about 6,000) are taking over gold and diamond mines while committing horrific crimes against civilians in the countries where they operate (Mali, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan and Mozambique).

The commander of the 'Wagner force' Yevgeny Prigozhin sees the military coups as business opportunities, but he acts for Russia's global interests and gives it a "space of denial" (Plausible Deniability).<sup>8</sup> The commander, Prigozhin, commented on the situation in Niger and welcomed the coup: "The population in Niger has been reduced to poverty for a very long time. For example, a French company that rented pine trees there earned 218 UD\$ per kilo and paid Niger 11. It is impossible to return so little to the natives, to whom the land belongs and who were born in the country. Therefore, this is a struggle for the liberation of the country".<sup>9</sup>

---

7 See the link: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2022> ; <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/sahel-and-somalia-drive-uninterrupted-rise-in-african-militant-islamist-group-violence-over-past-decade/>

8 A 'space of denial' is a type of denial in the field of international relations: it is the ability of a state - or another similar entity - to deny actions it has carried out, in a way that would at least raise doubts about its responsibility. This, when she recognizes that the other party does not have much motivation to act in response; And it is clear to her that if she admits to these actions, it will be very difficult for him not to respond.

9 See the link: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/29/africa/prigozhin-niger-coup-wagner-intl/index.html>



Don't fall into the trap and don't be naïve, Wagner does nothing for free: it remains an approach of financial predation with the associated charges. Wagner then does not provide any security solution and certainly not in terms of the fight against terrorism. We must look objectively at the situation in Mali after the departure of Barkhane and Minusma: 40% of Mali's territory is not under the control of the state! It's bankruptcy, failure. Many ECOWAS players are aware of this.

In recent years, military coups have taken place in Burkina Faso and Mali, which led to the removal of the French and international military forces operating there and their approach to Russia. The fear now is that a similar thing may also happen in Niger - Niger will now march in the direction of Russia. Cooperation between Niger and Russia would be a 'disaster' for the USA and France, as they cannot afford to withdraw unilaterally from Niger and leave the territory, resources and the fighting mission of the radical Islamic organizations to the 'Wagner force' in the name of Russia. It can already be determined that their removal/abandonment or departure according to the demand of the military junta ruling Niger, of the Western forces, will mark a dramatic decrease in the ability to fight and curb the spread of jihadist organizations in the Sahel and curb its spread towards the Gulf of Guinea, will strengthen the local trend of talking with the radical enemy and reaching an agreement to apply laws 'Sharia' in large parts of the country, and of course will strengthen Russia's growing influence in the region which is reflected in the increased sale of weapons.

In any case, one must wait until the end of the ultimatum given by the African Union to the military junta in Niger (15 days) according to which it must return power to the legal president Mohammed Bazoum, otherwise, beyond an economic boycott, they will take strong actions including the possibility of involvement military.<sup>10</sup> The ECOWAS organization (Economic Community of West African States) also gave a week-long ultimatum.<sup>11</sup> France and the USA called for Bazoum to be returned to power immediately and will not act against the rebels for a week.<sup>12</sup> In this case, it is important to see how Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso will act, who promised to protect Niger and fight alongside her against any aggressor.<sup>13</sup>

Will we soon see another multi-participant war on the African continent like the one that took place for years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a war in which sev-

---

10 See the link: <https://apnews.com/article/niger-au-coup-tchiani-bazoum-ecowas-2ad1d7e269a5f1c15e9b8b96d50fe3ee>.

11 See the link: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/07/31/ecowas-leaders-give-niger-one-week-ultimatum-to-restore-president/>; <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/612806-updated-niger-coup-ecowas-gives-ultimatum-for-return-to-normalcy-threatens-force.html>

12 See the link: <https://www.wwno.org/npr-news/npr-news/2023-07-31/u-s-france-and-african-leaders-give-coup-leaders-in-niger-one-week-to-step-down>.

13 See the link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/01/world/africa/niger-coup-mali-burkina-faso.html>.



en African countries took part, nearly 10 million people were killed, devastated the country and created waves of starving refugees and is still bleeding to this day? Time will tell us.