

Coup in Niger: Why Military Intervention is Doomed to Fail

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Policy Recommendations to the German Government

\ Do not support external military intervention in Niger

An external military intervention in Niger risks uncontrollable, devastating and destabilising consequences for the country and the entire region. It should not be supported, and Germany should distance itself from the French position on this.

\ Remain engaged to prevent the further spread of jihadist groups

Vulnerable populations in Niger should not be left at the mercy of jihadist groups taking advantage of the country's political instability. The urgently needed humanitarian and development assistance to these populations should be resumed as soon as possible. Germany should use its influence in multilateral alliances, such as the Sahel Alliance, to support a common approach in this regard.

\ Support diplomatic efforts to find a way out of the crisis

Germany should back and support constructive efforts to find a negotiated way out of the crisis through peaceful means of diplomacy and through joint multilateral efforts.

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Background

The current situation in Niger is a *déjà-vu* in the West African Sahel, which some have described as having re-entered the era of 'neo-colonialism'. What began in Niger on 26 July is the continuation of a dynamic which started in Mali in 2020 and has since then seen six successive military coups: two in Mali, two in Burkina Faso, one in Guinea, and the latest in Niger. The junta that seized power from the democratically elected President Bazoum in Niger suspended the constitution and installed General Abdourahmane Tchiani as head of state, President of the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the international community—some more strongly than others—swiftly condemned the coup and called for a return to constitutional order through the reinstatement of President Bazoum. ECOWAS has since closed all borders with Niger from other ECOWAS states and suspended all trade and financial transactions with the country, among other things. Energy, food, and even pharmaceutical products have been affected. In addition, ECOWAS has also threatened the putschists with military intervention if they do not reinstate Bazoum. It has also decided to activate a standby force with the potential support of at least five West African countries: Nigeria, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Guinea-Bissau. The corresponding ultimatum expired on 7 August, but the option of military intervention remains on the table.

These recent events are all the more critical because Niger is considered an 'anchor of stability' for international support for the Sahel, including Germany's, particularly in the fight against terrorism. Germany has provided various forms of support to Niger's security forces, for instance, through Operation Gazelle.

The loss of Niger as a key security partner in the Sahel raises critical questions about how former partners, including Germany, will position themselves vis-à-vis Niger in light of the changed political and security dynamics.

This *policy brief* provides actionable arguments for why Germany should not support a military intervention, why support for vulnerable populations remains critical and why backing diplomatic efforts is the way forward.

Do not Support Military Intervention in Niger

The military takeover in Niger has generated solidarity among 'the association of military juntas' in the West African region, namely the juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea Conakry. With their backing and the 'strong' popular support enjoyed by the putschists in the troubled country, a military intervention may never achieve ECOWAS' objective of restoring constitutional order in Niger. Instead, it could open a Pandora's box for the ECOWAS' standby force—and those who support it—with potentially devastating consequences, including loss of life, high logistical, financial and incalculable human costs, and massive, forced displacement with direct implications for Europe. The risk of failure, and of a protracted conflict, is very real and could have a destabilising effect on the whole region.

Military intervention may also limit the political space for effective multilateralism now and in the future. In particular, a failed military intervention in Niger risks discrediting ECOWAS as a legitimate security provider in the region. It carries reputational risks not only for the organisation but also for those who support it. Support through a UN Security Council resolution or a similar text from the AU Peace and Security Council is currently still lacking. AU member states have only 'taken note' of ECOWAS' decision to deploy a standby force but have strongly rejected 'any external interference by an actor or a foreign country in matters of peace and security in Africa'.

As France has worked closely with ECOWAS on development cooperation for many years, the recent coup d'état in Niger has seen strong support from the French Government for the ECOWAS military intervention. This has caused mixed feelings among the Nigeriens, who see the French government's involvement as an obstacle to political and economic autonomy. Widespread anti-French sentiment in the Sahel region and growing opposition to France's colonial legacy, coupled with the perceived overlapping interests of ECOWAS and France, have increased the popularity of Niger's junta, forcing many Nigeriens to take up arms against what is perceived as possible external aggression.

Even if a military intervention were 'successful' in the sense that Bazoum was reinstated, it would certainly not be business as usual. The cracks in his image and that of his government run deep, and his return could pave the way for future unrest and security challenges in the country. It could also create resentment towards regional institutions and harm the legitimacy of ECOWAS in the region. This will most certainly play into the hands of those (Russia, for example) pushing sovereignty-led discourses, who may appear to be more suitable partners for the Sahelian states in the future. We have already seen such a scenario play out in Mali, where Russia has taken advantage of the situation by offering the state an alternative form of security, mainly through the private military company Wagner. Whether Wagner will also establish itself in Niger remains to be seen, especially after the recent death of Wagner leader Prigozhin and the group's uncertain future.

In view of the above-mentioned risks and potential negative repercussions for the entire region, Germany should not support a military intervention and clearly distance itself from the French position in this regard.

Remain Engaged to Prevent the Further Spread of Jihadist Groups

Another much less talked about but no less present actor are the jihadist groups. The military intervention will inevitably change the priorities of the Niger Army, which, given its many shortcomings (in terms of manpower, equipment and financial resources to maintain the troops engaged in the war), is likely to be severely unbalanced in the face of the jihadist groups. This represents a godsend for the latter, who could take advantage of the situation to increase their territorial gains and extend their sphere of influence. The situation in Mali in 2012 is instructive in this respect. Thanks to the coup d'état of 22 March 2012 and the ensuing clashes between the different components of the army—the 'terrestrial army' (the green berets) versus the parachute commandos (the red berets)—the armed groups have managed to occupy the whole of northern Mali.

Indeed, some alarming trends are already emerging. In the face of the harsh financial and trade sanctions imposed on Niger by ECOWAS and the threat of military intervention, jihadist groups such as the Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP) have begun to relocate to border communities to escape the possible consequences of the military intervention and to gain more control over farmland. In this regard, border communities have witnessed increased banditry and violent takeover of farmland by the jihadists since the coup d'état. While the ongoing violent conflicts from ISWAP and the adverse climate conditions have generally had a negative impact on agricultural production and food security in the Lake Chad Basin region, the political instability in Niger has exacerbated this situation.

Vulnerable populations should not be left at the mercy of jihadist groups. The German government should continue to provide much-needed humanitarian and development assistance to those in need, such as border communities that are now severely affected by

the sanctions. It is important to continue to press for humanitarian exemptions from the collective sanctions imposed on the country, as requested by a wide range of local and international humanitarian agencies working in Niger and supported by EU foreign ministers in Toledo on 31 August. This is an important aspect of avoiding the negative consequences of sanctions, which could further increase the suffering of the population, reinforce negative sentiments towards ECOWAS and its supporters and encourage support for the junta and other actors, including non-state armed groups.

By continuing to provide humanitarian and development assistance, the German government can signal its willingness to support the most vulnerable people in the region (including young people) who are generally at the greatest risk of being recruited by armed actors, including armed jihadi groups. Where appropriate, such support can be channelled through decentralised pathways involving partners at the local level. Germany should use its influence within multi-lateral alliances, such as the Sahel Alliance, to support a common approach.

Support Diplomatic Efforts to Find a Way Out of the Crisis

It is clear that the succession of coups in the region is undermining hard-won democratic gains and creating a contagion effect as coup leaders successfully retain power. The coup in Niger also poses a major challenge to the credibility of ECOWAS as a common regional organisation, which has already lost four members to previous coups. If the putschists in Niger manage to hold on to power, it will certainly further reduce ECOWAS' relevance in the region and increase the incentive for coups to take place in other countries in West Africa and beyond, as is currently the case in Gabon. If ECOWAS does not succeed in restoring constitutional order in Niger, there is a risk that long-lasting military regimes with protracted transitions will become entrenched in the region. But if a military intervention is not the answer, what is the way out?

Military intervention is a remedy that is far worse than the evil it seeks to cure. ECOWAS can still use the transnational influence of traditional and spiritual leaders such as the Sultan of Sokoto (Nigeria) and the Sultan of Damagaram from Zinder (Niger) to keep the lines of communication open and persuade the coup leaders to back down.

Algeria, which shares almost 1,000 km of border with Niger, was also very keen to find a peaceful solution to the crisis, as it would be directly affected by the negative consequences of a military intervention. Under the auspices of its head of diplomacy, Ahmed Attaf, Algeria has put forward a proposal that includes a six-month transition period and the launch of inclusive national consultations, including adequate guarantees for all parties concerned.

It is uncertain whether the junta in Niger will accept such a proposal (Tchiani called for a three-year transition phase), but it is certainly worth trying as it contains many important and forward-looking elements that could be further developed in joint diplomatic efforts. The more international and regional support there is for a negotiated solution, the better the outcome will be, certainly better than the unnecessary loss of life.

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