

## THE WIDER WORLD

### Niger Revisited after Military Coup

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For those of you who follow this series, you will have seen [the last piece on the relative stability of Niger](#) vis á vis Mali's turbulence. Well, there's a saying in global affairs circles that "West Africa Always Wins." The acronym "WAWA" is the distinct wailing sound produced by all Africa analysts when we commit something to the permanent record about the region, which soon afterward proves false, sometimes the very next day.

So it goes with Niger, last month's Western poster child of stability. My piece hit your inbox on July 25. On July 26, a military coup took place in Niger's capital city of Niamey, seizing popularly elected President Mohamed Bazoum. Bazoum was the first Nigerien president to take office in a peaceful democratic transition of power.

To go back further, Niger, along with neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso, was a French colony from 1900 until 1960. In the aftermath of World War II, most western powers realized they could no longer rebuild at home and afford to keep major colonies abroad. This occurred in tandem with independence movements growing in many African countries. By 1960, the dam broke, and France allowed Niger to become independent but had made significant investments in the country and maintained strong trade and financial relationships that some characterize as a new form of colonization.

Observers have noted that the problem with colonization is that most countries stayed long enough to destroy indigenous elements of government and not long

enough to instill something new. The example the colonizers set was that the strong win the spoils; thus was the case of many former colonies, where no history of democratic traditions had ever existed, and the legacy of Western politics had little appeal to those who had not benefitted from them. In Niger, and in many other former colonies, the strong came in the form of military leaders who toppled one another with a series of military coups.

Another option that began to circulate in the early 21st century was the imposition of sharia law in countries with long Islamic traditions, including Niger. Sharia was familiar as a form of dispute resolution used in localities, such as villages, where a local imam would mediate disagreements in family, land, livestock, contracts, and other situations. As one of my mentors in peacekeeping often noted, “We could achieve peace if we could just solve the problems of women and cows,” suggesting stabilization efforts begin at the most local of levels.

However, the form of sharia espoused by groups like al-Qaida that are increasing their reach in the region is far harsher and has its roots in religious intolerance, which was not typical of the multicultural countries in the Sahel that claimed traditions that predated Islam.

By the early 2000s, there were already local conflicts between governments and al-Qaida groups coalescing in the region. This led to varying degrees of civil war, including among the ruling military and Islamic factions themselves. As usual, the civilians suffered from changing policies and violent attacks from all sides. With no democratic national tradition, their perspectives had little voice.

In addition to the domestic and interloping international groups within countries, there are regional interests. You may have heard of diplomatic efforts in the recent crisis by the United Nations and the African Union (A.U.), a U.N.- like group of all African countries headquartered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, that is meant to be a consultative, development, and peacekeeping body composed only of Africans with continental interests. When Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi was alive, he championed the A.U. and often paid its dues for poorer countries. The issue then was that Gaddafi planned to turn the A.U. into a United States of Africa with himself as the ultimate sovereign. When Gaddafi was deposed and later killed, much of the Sahel region devolved into even further turmoil.

Before the A.U., there had been an Organisation [sic] of African States (OAS) that had similar objectives but maintained a *laissez faire* policy of non-interference in neighbors’ affairs, no matter if the neighbor was starving or killing its citizens. This was the result of the original colonial carving up of the continent by colonial powers in the “Scramble for Africa” that frequently fought each other for territory. Once the borders were established, contemporary leaders decided they wanted to keep them that way.

The OAS lasted from the beginning of the independence era in 1963 until 1993, when it was replaced by the A.U. This new organization had a different charter and recognized the colonial map had divided many communities and placed them in different countries. Borders had also made transhumance much more difficult. That is the term used for nomadic lifestyles in which generally livestock herders moved around with their animals with the changing seasons. Now more confined within national borders and with encroaching urbanization, nomadic herders increasingly find themselves in conflict with sedentary farmers who do not appreciate herds of cattle and goats gorging themselves on their carefully tended fields.

The A.U. has sought to manage many of the issues across Africa and was much modeled after the U.N., which pledges impartiality and to provide a diplomatic space for dispute resolution as well as working closely with the U.N. to increase human security along the Millennium Development Goals framework (yet another story for another day). In addition to the A.U., there are also regional geographic groupings of African countries that serve similar roles, although like the European Union model, they began essentially as economic development vehicles. The one we are concerned with now is ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, arguably the most active and effective of these regional organizations. Like the A.U., it involves itself in matters far beyond economics, including diplomacy and peacekeeping.

Along with France, other Western powers, and the A.U., ECOWAS has attempted to pressure the week-old military regime in Niger to release President Bazoum and allow him to regain his office. The next steps, along with evacuations of foreign residents from Niger, will likely be imposition of sanctions by any or [all of](#) these groups. At issue for the U.S. in all this turmoil is its 1,500 troops currently stationed in Niger. They operate out of a [\\$1 billion](#) drone base in the country used to monitor Islamic militant activity across the region.



*Niger coup supporters waving Russian flags*

Somewhat of a shock for Western observers has been the scenes of coup-supporting Nigeriens waving Russian flags and attacking the French embassy in Niamey.[i] The photo shows a sign reading “Down with France, Long Live Putin.” Considering Niger’s colonial history, the first part is not terribly surprising, but “Long live Putin?!! Remember, neither China nor Russia ever had colonies in Africa.

Russia and China have been actively participating in the 21st century scramble for African natural resources and diplomatic support along with the West. In 2007, U.S. President George W. Bush attempted to place a new military base in Africa to challenge China and increasingly Russia, but no country would have us. We instead rented a portion of French-held Camp Lumiere in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa and maintained the headquarters of our newly formed U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) in Germany, co-located with the U.S. European Command (EUCOM).

While much international analyst focus has been on Chinese activity in Africa, the vanguard of Russian interests is a familiar organization – the Wagner Group. The alleged failed coup in Russia seems now to have been some kind of theater, the purpose and outcome of which we still do not fully understand. Despite the threat of exile for Wagner chief Yevgeny Progozhin in Belarus, Russian President Vladimir Putin simply cannot seem to do without Progozhin.

Not only was Wagner supporting Putin’s war in Ukraine, some say more successfully than Russian troops, but it was also the tip of the Russian spear in Syria. Wagner, among other Russian contracting firms, have been supplementing Russian military efforts since at least 2013, until it consolidated its preeminence. This quasi-private company carries out Putin’s interests abroad with plausible deniability, as it is not technically part of the government. Wagner is known to have been negotiating security contracts for national and business leaders across the Sahel in the Central African Republic (C.A.R.), Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan (another story for next time). Wagner has also been protecting gas and oil fields and mines as well as obtaining contracts for its own (or Russia’s) natural resource exploration.

Wagner has become so ubiquitous in the Sahel that the Malian government is now completely reliant upon it for security. So much so that in June 2023, it petitioned the United Nations Security Council to end its decade-old peacekeeping mission in that country, which will entirely wrap up by December 31. Observers are entreating the U.N. not to leave hastily, like the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in late 2021. There are fears that this exit is likely to leave behind nine highly fortified bases and untold amounts of materiel, depending upon

specific withdrawal negotiations. Much like the U.S. drone base in Niger, these could become significant gifts to Russian entities.[ii]

As China and Russia have systematically attempted to reduce Western influence in international organizations, beginning with the U.N., their actions appear to be a new effort of going straight to the people for support of Russian designs using disinformation and colonial history, much like its activities in U.S. and European elections over the past decade.

While many Americans may not have been watching Africa closely, Russia has been working overtime to undermine our interests. Despite our insistence on Latin America and South America being in our sphere of influence since President James Monroe's famous doctrine declaration of 1823, we have been somewhat asleep at the watch when it comes to this region. Russia and China have not. The plan to overturn the post-World War II *Pax Americana* is in full swing; thus, it is important to recognize these individual cases as much more than singular events. They are part of a highly organized, opportunistic method of achieving hegemony without direct declarations of war.

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### References

[i] Photo reference available [here](#) accessed on August 1, 2023.

[ii] "Ensuring MINUSMA's Smooth Departure from Mali," *International Crisis Group Commentary*, June 27, 2023 available [here](#) and accessed on August 1, 2023.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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