

West African states to hold Thursday summit on Niger intervention

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Niger and the wider West African region are teetering on the brink of war.

Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum was deposed in a military coup led by the chief of his presidential guard Abdourahamane Tchiani on July 26. After a deadline for Bazoum's reinstatement set down by the Economic Community of West African States expired Sunday, ECOWAS announced a summit to be held in the Nigerian capital Abuja this Thursday.

Nigeria, on Niger's southern border, dominates the union, with 230 million of its total 400 million population, 250,000 soldiers and 35 combat aircraft. Together with Senegal and the Ivory Coast, its government has indicated it would send troops if agreed.

While Nigeria's Senate voted not to approve a military intervention, a similar vote did not stop then-President Muhammadu Buhari from deploying troops to The Gambia in 2017 to remove President Yahya Jammeh—after he refused to hand over power to Adama Barrow. Nigeria has also led major interventions in Liberia in 1992 and Sierra Leone in 1997.

ECOWAS commissioner for political affairs, peace and security Abdel-Fatau Musah warned Friday, "All the elements that will go into any eventual intervention have been worked out." He continued, "We are determined to stop it, but ECOWAS is not going to tell the coup plotters when and where we are going to strike."

The military leaders in Niger have closed the country's airspace, "In the face of the threat of intervention that is becoming more apparent." They warned that any violation would meet "an energetic and instant response."

A spokesperson declared that two African countries had already begun deploying forces, adding, "Niger's armed forces and all our defence and security forces, backed by the unfailing support of our people, are ready to defend the integrity of our territory." The country has 25,000 soldiers in its armed forces, and two combat aircraft.

The coup leaders in Niger are supported by the regimes on its Western border in Mali and Burkina Faso—products of military coups in May 2021 and September 2022—which have said they will treat an ECOWAS invasion of Niger as a declaration of war against them. The two countries sent a delegation to the Nigerien capital Niamey on Monday, to demonstrate their "solidarity... with the brotherly people of Niger," according to the Malian army.

Guinea, run by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya as interim president following a coup in September 2021, has also backed Niger.

Algeria and Chad, both large countries with significant military forces, bordering Niger to the North and East, have declared against military action and said they would not intervene. Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune described any war as a "direct threat to Algeria."

ECOWAS has already imposed sanctions on Niger, suspending all commercial transactions, freezing its state assets, suspending financial assistance through regional development banks and cutting electricity supply, leading to blackouts.

The imperialist powers, including France, Germany, the UK, and the European Union have suspended aid payments. These measures are a humanitarian time bomb in a country where 40 percent of the government budget is provided by international aid.

France, the former colonial power in Niger, has been the most aggressive. Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna met Nigerian Prime Minister Ouhoumoudou Mahamadou in Paris on Saturday before declaring, "France supports with firmness and determination the efforts of ECOWAS to defeat this coup attempt." She left unsaid whether this would include French military support.

Italy and Germany have been more cautious. Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani told *La Stampa* Monday, "The only way is the diplomatic one." Annalena

Baerbock, German Minister of Foreign Affairs, “welcome[d] the mediation efforts.”

There are major interests at stake—most importantly the supply of and profits from crucial energy commodities, and the policing of African migration to Europe.

Niger is the world’s seventh-largest producer of uranium, Europe’s second largest supplier (at 25 percent) after Kazakhstan. Its other major exports include gold and, locally, petroleum.

This wealth is controlled by foreign companies. The SOMAIR, COMINAK and Imouraren uranium mines are majority owned by French interests, the SOMINA uranium mine, Agadem Basin oil wells and SORAZ refinery by Chinese, and the Samira Hill Gold Mine by Canadian.

None of the profits generated make their way back to the Nigerien population. The country’s tax-to-GDP ratio was just 9.8 percent in 2022—the OECD average is 34 percent. Massive tax exemptions for the extractive industries mean that Niger’s uranium production contributes a mere 4-6 percent to its government revenue.

Much of this is in any case spent on “security” on behalf of the European powers. Niger is considered central to what the European Union’s former special representative for the Sahel Ángel Losada called “Europe’s new forward border.” Its northern town and region of Agadez is considered the gateway to the Sahara, and a major staging point for journeys to the North African coast and on to Europe.

Hundreds of millions of euros have been spent by the EU employing the Nigerien military and police as pre-emptive border guards. It sponsored Law 2015—36 cracking down on migration through the country which has caused immense disruption to patterns of social and economic life in the region and fuelled a dramatic growth in illegal smuggling.

Italy and Germany, two of the European powers most involved in policing migration across the Mediterranean, are worried a major conflict would blow up these arrangements and drive huge numbers to seek asylum in Europe. It would also undermine Italy’s “Mattei Plan” for sourcing more of its energy from Africa, already involving major deals with Algeria and Libya and discussions with Congo-Brazzaville, Angola, and Mozambique.

For Niger, exploitation and “securitization” have contributed to a social catastrophe. Over 40 percent of the population live on less than \$1.90 a day, with nearly 20 percent requiring humanitarian assistance. Over 3 million

people suffer acute food shortages. More than 40 percent of children aged 5-14 are labouring.

These conditions, combined with an influx of NATO’s Islamist proxies used in the Libyan civil war to the Sahel, have fuelled the growth of jihadist militias across the region, responsible for thousands of killings every year and hundreds of thousands of displacements.

Hostility to the government of Bazoum and his Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism which presided over this disaster, combined with opposition to the presence of now ousted French soldiers, will have contributed to the rally of 30,000 in support of the coup on Sunday.

But Tchiani is no more a solution to Niger’s problems than ECOWAS and the imperialist powers. None of the military takeovers in the region have done anything to improve the conditions of the population, whatever the anti-colonialist rhetoric deployed.

The task confronting the Nigerien working class and rural masses is to mobilize for the defeat of Tchiani and Bazoum and to reach out to their class brothers and sisters across West Africa, whose interests they share, to take up the same fight against their own ruling elites, rather than a fratricidal war.

In an already fragile society, any conflict between ECOWAS and Niger-Mali-Burkina Faso would have appalling consequences. Commenting on the prospect, Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies Cameron Hudson told *Foreign Policy*, “If it’s not a bluff and they were to attempt to go through with this, there is no clean way that happens without massive civilian casualties and without the fear of a spreading regional conflict.”



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