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BRIEFING: HOW A MUTINY BECAME A(NOTHER) COUP: THE POLITICS OF COUNTERINSURGENCY AND INTERNATIONAL MILITARY PARTNERSHIPS IN NIGER

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Abstract

This briefing explores the factors that led to the consolidated position of the Nigerien Security and Defence forces in support of the coup d'état launched the night of 26th July 2023. The initial blockade of the former President's palace by the head of the Presidential Guard and 350 of its members looked like a mutiny. However, instead of moving swiftly to end the blockade, commanders from across the security forces appeared on national television that night to announce a coup. We show how dominant theories that have been used to explain the coup's (unlikely) success, including those relying on patrimonialism and coups as intra-military coordination games, do not adequately explain the support for the coup across rank and file, and the direction the coup took once announced. We argue that this coup cannot be fully explained without considering how the coup leaders advanced powerful ideological messages to garner support. By making the coup about 'correcting' the government's counter-insurgency strategy and regaining Niger's sovereignty through the removal of French counter-terrorism troops from the country, members of the military believed that everyone else would support the coup, thus making it less likely that they would resist the coup leaders.

On the morning of 26 July 2023, General Abdourahmane Tiani, head of Niger's Presidential Guard, and approximately 350 of its members took President Mohamed Bazoum hostage at the presidential palace in

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Niamey. At first, their blockade looked like a mutiny. There had been a falling out between Bazoum and Tiani when the president had demanded more accountability for the Presidential Guard's expenditures.¹ It was also rumoured that Bazoum was considering replacing Tiani. Although the General was close to former president Mahamadou Issoufou, his influence was limited across the Nigerien Security and Defence Forces (FDS). In the hours that followed the blockade, there was still a possibility that loyalist FDS units would intervene, having travelled from different parts of the country to Niamey to do so.² Indeed, the commander of the National Guard and the former minister of foreign affairs even requested support from the French military for an intervention to secure Bazoum's release.³ Instead of moving swiftly to end the blockade, however, senior officers from the army, special forces, air force, military engineering, the police, and the fire and rescue service appeared on national television that night to announce a coup and the formation of the *Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie* (CNSP).⁴

What incentivized those officers to support and ultimately accomplish Niger's fifth military coup since independence? This briefing explores the factors that led to the consolidated position of senior FDS commanders on the night of 26 July and the broader support from the rank and file that emerged thereafter. Indeed, siding with Tiani was a risky move. At that point, it was not clear whether the population would support the coup. Several hundred protesters took to the streets of Niamey the evening of 26 July to denounce Tiani's actions. Unlike in neighbouring Mali in 2020, there had been no popular protests demanding Bazoum's resignation. Niger's last three successful coups were preceded by a political impasse, such as in February 2010 when President Mamadou Tandja tried unconstitutionally to extend his term.⁵ The coup on 26 July was not a response to a particular political crisis. While there were allegations of electoral fraud in the 2021 run-off presidential election,⁶ protests in Niamey over the election results

1. Mathieu Olivier, 'Au Niger, Bazoum, Tiani, et les milliards de la discorde', *Jeune Afrique*, 22 August 2023, <<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1474390/politique/au-niger-bazoum-tiani-et-les-milliards-de-la-discorde/>> (27 October 2023).

2. *Africa Confidential*, 'A Coup Foretold but not Averted', 3 August 2023, <https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/14543/A_coup_foretold_but_not_averterd> (27 October 2023).

3. Elise Barthes and Morgane Le Cam, 'Niger: la France a été sollicitée pour libérer le président Mohamed Bazoum', *Le Monde*, 19 August 2023, <https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/08/19/niger-la-france-a-ete-sollicitee-pour-liberer-le-president-mohamed-bazoum_6185898_3210.html> (27 October 2023).

4. The National Guard and Gendarmerie were represented by their seconds-in-command.

5. Virginie Baudais and Grégory Chauzal, 'Briefing: The 2010 coup d'état in Niger: A praetorian regulation of politics?', *African Affairs* 110, 439 (2011), pp. 295–304.

6. Voter turnout numbers recorded in Tahoua by the Independent Electoral Commission for Niger (CENI) were particularly suspicious. In Tchintabaraden, voter turnout was 95 percent, of which Bazoum received 97 percent of the votes. In the Azeye municipality, turnout was

were suppressed by the FDS within a week. There were two coup attempts during Bazoum's time in power and protests organized by civil society and the political opposition had been aggressively suppressed, but for the most part, it seemed that Nigeriens had accepted Bazoum as their president.

Even more critically, at the time of the coup, Niger's FDS was a major partner of international military assistance, receiving huge amounts of security aid from Western countries. As the international community was unlikely to approve of a coup against a president they viewed as democratically elected and, in the case of Western-aligned countries, a key ally in the fight against terrorism, FDS officials were risking forfeiting funding and equipment for each of their organizations. What incentivized those commanders to take these risks and support the coup?

In the weeks that followed, various plausible theories surfaced in the media. Explanations included senior officers' fear of being targeted in an anti-corruption drive by Bazoum,⁷ coup leaders wanting to secure access to the sale of oil blocks,⁸ and disgruntlement within the FDS over the country's migration control reforms.⁹ Journalists and activists close to Bazoum's party, the *Partie Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme* (PNDS-Tarayya), also shared theories about Issoufou (one of the party's founders) orchestrating the coup in order to return to power or to consolidate his position and that of his son, Mahamane Sani Mahamadou, within Niger's emerging oil economy.

Recent academic work on coups likewise provides some useful insights, for example, Naunihal Singh's explanation that coup outcomes are the result of intra-military coordination games.¹⁰ In this view, military officers' primary incentive during a coup is to prevent unnecessary internecine violence where they and their families' lives are likely to be in danger. Indeed, the reason given by Niger's now former chief of staff of the armed forces,

99.76 percent, of which Bazoum also won 97 percent of the votes. In interviews conducted by the authors in May 2022 in Tahoua, interviewees reported witnessing ballot box stuffing during the election run-off.

7. See *Africa Confidential*, 'The coup d'état as a get-out-of-jail card', 10 August 2023, <https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/14556/The_coup_d%27état_as_get-out-of-jail_card> (27 October 2023).

8. See Paul Deutschmann, Fatoumata Diallo and Joan Tilouine, 'Former President Mahamadou Issoufou's fingerprints all over Niger coup', *Africa Intelligence*, 21 August 2023, <<https://www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2023/08/21/former-president-mahamadou-issoufou-s-fingerprints-all-over-niger-coup,110033873-ge0>> (27 October 2023); Mathieu Olivier, 'Coup d'état au Niger: Et si le pétrole expliquait tout?', *Jeune Afrique*, 22 August 2023, <<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1474423/politique/coup-detat-au-niger-eti-si-le-petrole-expliquait-tout>> (27 October 2023).

9. See Zeinab Mohammed Salih, 'Niger observers link coup to president's support for EU migration policies', *The Guardian*, 23 August 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/23/niger-observers-link-coup-to-president-mohamed-bazoum-support-of-eu-migration-policies-people-smuggling>> (27 October 2023).

10. Naunihal Singh, *Seizing power: The strategic logic of military coups* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 2014).

General Abdou Sidikou Issa, for acquiescing to the coup was to avoid intra-FDS fighting.¹¹ An Armed Forces General similarly mentioned that their reasoning for supporting the coup was, in part, to avoid ‘shooting amongst ourselves’.¹² According to Singh, military personnel support the side that they believe everyone else will back, i.e. the side that will *win* rather than the side they *prefer* to win, and opt for the least risky outcome because they lack the assurance that others will cooperate to produce preferred outcomes. The puzzling thing about the 26 July coup in Niger is that, initially, it looked more likely that other parts of the FDS would cooperate to *quash* Tiani’s mutiny. Why did senior commanders ultimately decide to support the side that at first looked more likely to lose?

While there is no one explanation for the coup,¹³ and it is likely that rent-seeking incentives among political and military elites influenced Tiani’s initial decision to launch the mutiny, these theories fail to adequately explain the direction the coup took and the support that its leaders ostensibly enjoyed at both senior and junior levels across the country’s different military and security corps. We highlight additional factors gleaned from several months of fieldwork in the country prior to the coup and a series of remote telephone interviews since 26 July.¹⁴ We show how disagreements between the FDS and Bazoum over the latter’s counter-insurgency strategy, and in particular the decision to accept French troops to operate on the ground in Niger, were used to consolidate support for the coup across the armed forces. By making the coup about correcting the country’s counter-insurgency strategy and ousting French troops, Tiani and other senior

11. Ministry of Defence Niger, Official communication from the chief of staff of the armed forces, 27 July 2023.

12. Telephone interview, FAN general, 12 August 2023.

13. See Yvan Guichaoua and Nina Wilén, ‘A coup like no other: Three reasons why the coup in Niger is different from previous coups in the Sahel (and why it’s very serious)’, *Democracy in Africa*, August 2023, <<https://democracyin africa.org/a-coup-like-no-other-three-reasons-why-the-coup-in-niger-is-different-from-previous-coups-in-the-sahel-and-why-its-very-serious/>> (27 October 2023).

14. Several methodological challenges present themselves in researching Sahelian coups. In Niger, dissent has been harshly subdued since the events of 26 July and it is very difficult to get an accurate picture of the extent of support the CNSP enjoys among the FDS’ rank and file. Furthermore, the current context is fast-moving; new allegiances within the FDS are likely to be forming as we write. That said, this research relies on the authors’ long-term engagement with Niger and well-established networks in the country. Our analysis is based on 110 interviews that we collectively conducted with different individuals, both civilian and military, in the two years prior to the coup, with many participants being interviewed several times. Following the coup, we conducted an additional ten telephone interviews with members of the FDS at different ranks with whom we had spoken to prior to the coup. In the post-coup context, conducting large scale interviews without raising suspicions presents risks for our interlocutors. As such, the research maintains their confidentiality and anonymity. While the number of interviews we have conducted since the coup is limited, this research has attempted to remain abreast of Niger’s on-going coup and security politics and whenever possible triangulates information from reliable open-sources. Data supporting this study cannot be made available due to ethical restrictions.

commanders were able to lead military personnel to believe that everyone else would support the CNSP's intervention and ensure their cooperation. Before examining why this strategy can explain how the coup became a *fait accompli* given unlikely odds, we take a brief look at the history of coups in Niger and the strategies that leaders have used to control for the risk of coups, most of which centre around rent-seeking. We then show how rent-seeking is too narrow a frame through which to understand why this coup was a success. In the second part of the paper, we show why making the coup about correcting the country's counter-insurgency became a potent narrative around which to build support for the coup.

Coup-proofing and the distribution of rents in Niger's defence and security sector

Niger has a long history of coups and military government. Since independence, there have (at the time of writing) been five successful, and many more attempted coups, totalling more than 22 years of khaki and 'camo'-led governance. The 'military-politicians' who led these coups justified their actions by delegitimizing previous regimes' governance and highlighting their failures to alleviate challenges ordinary Nigeriens face.¹⁵ Quick to follow this pattern, Tiani argued in his 28 July 2023 televised speech that the actions of the CNSP were 'motivated solely by the desire to preserve our beloved homeland in face of the continuing deterioration of the security situation in our country, with no real solution to the crisis in sight from the deposed authorities, and due to poor economic and social governance.'¹⁶ The CNSP's justifications thus evoked the military's historical role of 'course correcting' in the face of supposedly irresponsible civilian political leadership.

At first glance, the Nigerien military's repeated insertion of itself into the country's governance resembles a case of 'external drift' whereby a post-colonial state receives military equipment and training from external states, creating a powerful organization that can easily overpower others, including civilian governments.¹⁷ Since independence, Niger has received significant military training and equipment from its former colonial power, France. Risks of external drift of the FDS arguably increased as Niger became a key ally in the Global War on Terror, receiving assistance from a number of other Western states including the United States, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Canada, and entering into defence agreements with countries from

15. Mahamane Tidjani Alou, 'Les militaires politiciens', in Kimba Idrissa (ed), *Armée et politique au Niger* (CODESRIA, Dakar, 2008), pp. 93–124.

16. Tiani's speech is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qI3xUCBBFGU>> (29 September 2023).

17. Charles Tilly, *Coercion, capital and European states, AD 990–1990* (Blackwell, Cambridge MA, 1992).

the Global South such as Türkiye and Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ This is not to overstate the efficiency of external actors in their endeavours to provide security force assistance to West African militaries.¹⁹ What matters in the Nigerien context is that international interventions to build the FDS' capacities have resulted in an important flow of resources that simultaneously present opportunities for rent-distribution and rent-seeking behaviour, but which also contributed to intra-FDS rivalries.²⁰

In order to reduce the possibility of military overthrow, Nigerien civilian presidents have used the distribution of rents or opportunities to participate in various forms of graft to co-opt military elites. Tandja (1999–2010), a former armed forces colonel, organized handouts, and gave villas to his senior officers.²¹ During his tenure as president, Issoufou likewise turned a blind eye to the entrepreneurial activities of FDS officers posted in the northern parts of Niger, where the latter captured significant rents from trafficking activities, including human smuggling.²² In the context of Niger's growing importance to Western allies and increased military budgets, senior military officers loyal to Issoufou also benefited from international financing meant to equip the FDS but used the opportunity to syphon off millions by inflating the price of weapons purchased by the Nigerien state.²³

For many, Bazoum employed a riskier strategy in this regard. Committed to limiting corruption, he sought to reduce opportunities for graft within the military by preventing businesspeople associated with PNDS-Tarayya from conducting deals with officers that would allow them to inflate prices to receive kick-back payments. For example, Bazoum personally oversaw bilateral agreements to purchase arms, including an arms deal between Niger and Türkiye.²⁴ Since the coup, commentators quickly theorized that Bazoum's *lack* of rent-seeking and rent distribution created too many adversaries amongst the country's political and military elite for him to handle. In

18. James Rogers and Delina Goxho, 'Light footprint—heavy destabilising impact in Niger: Why the Western understanding of remote warfare needs to be reconsidered', *International Politics* 60, 4 (2022), pp. 790–817.

19. Niagalé Bagayoko, 'Explaining the failure of internationally-supported defence and security reforms in Sahelian states', *Conflict, Security & Development* 22, 3 (2022), pp. 243–269.

20. Nina Wilén, 'The impact of security force assistance in Niger: Meddling with borders', *International Affairs* 98, 4 (2022), pp. 1405–1421.

21. Baudais and Chauzal, 'Briefing: The 2010 coup d'état in Niger'.

22. See Luca Raineri, 'Human smuggling across Niger: State-sponsored protection rackets and contradictory security imperatives', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56, 1 (2018), pp. 63–86.

23. Moussa Aksar, 'Niger – malversations au ministère de la défense: 71,8 milliards de fca captés par des seigneurs du faux', *L'événement Niger*, 21 September 2020, <<https://levenementniger.com/niger-malversations-au-ministere-de-la-defense-718-milliards-de-fca-captés-par-des-seigneurs-du-faux/>> (27 October 2023).

24. Telephone interview with Nigerien entrepreneur, 25 September 2023; WhatsApp exchange with Nigerien journalist, 26 September 2023.

particular, Nigerien commentators now frequently advance that Bazoum's anti-corruption drive encroached too heavily on Issoufou's on-going rent-seeking strategies linked to the oil-industry, leading the former president to turn against Bazoum by manipulating his loyal clients within the military to undertake the coup.²⁵ Indeed, several of the coup leaders were promoted to their current roles under Issoufou and may have been willing to follow his orders.

While important, however, explanations that place excessive emphasis on rent-seeking behaviour associated with coup-proofing strategies remain wanting for a number of reasons. First, while Bazoum implemented reforms that reduced corruption connected to northern Niger's irregular migrant industry, this did not necessarily create anti-Bazoum factions within the security forces, but simply impelled those involved to adapt their rent-capture strategies, for example by charging migrant-traffickers more or performing their rackets in new, lower-profile locations.²⁶ Second, while there may have been certain commanders who were willing to support Tiani's coup to avoid being pursued by Bazoum's anti-corruption drive, this does not explain support from the rank and file, many of whom remain angry that those who were involved in the defence sector's over-billing scandal have not been punished, especially as the purchase of faulty and substandard weapons and equipment resulted in soldiers losing their lives on the frontline.²⁷

Third, most explanations place too much analytical weight on particular individuals—especially, Mahamoudou Issoufou. It is possible that Issoufou helped orchestrate the coup on 26 July in collaboration with Tiani and other military leaders with the intention of regaining control of the country following another short transition and elections in which his political party could win in the face of a weak opposition. However, for this theory to be correct, the coup leaders would likely have announced their intention to organize quick elections instead of their stated commitment to a transition lasting three years. It is also doubtful that the CNSP would have arrested Issoufou's son and key PNDS-Tarayya officials. If this was a coup orchestrated by Issoufou, it went out of control almost from the start.

We argue that while other senior commanders may have been incentivized by different rent-seeking opportunities to support the coup, it was

25. Nigerien journalist Seidik Abba provides the clearest example of this position. See Seidik Abba (@abbaseidik), 'En fait, «la guerre du pétrole » débute dès le 3 avril 2021, juste après l'investiture de Bazoum', Twitter, 1 September 2023, <<https://twitter.com/abbaseidik/status/1697670643003625919>> (26 October 2023).

26. Telephone interview with former people smuggler, 25 September 2023; Telephone interview with former police chief in Agadez, 26 September 2023.

27. Telephone interview with member of Gendarmerie, 27 July 2023; Interview, Nigerien supplier to the FDS, Niamey, 25 October 2022.

the divisions between the FDS and Bazoum's government and the possibility of changing course direction that allowed Tiani and certain influential commanders to make the coup a *fait accompli*, i.e. to make ordinary civilians and members of the FDS at-large believe that everyone would, and should, support the coup. These divisions were primarily around the country's counter-insurgency strategy, more specifically the use of non-kinetic and bottom-up counter-insurgency strategies promoted by Bazoum, and the 2022 deployment of French troops from Mali on the ground in Niger.

Divisions between the FDS and Bazoum's government

President Bazoum's counter-insurgency strategy involved a diversified grab-bag of policy instruments. Along with a kinetic enemy-centric counter-insurgency strategy in partnership with Western forces,²⁸ Bazoum also spearheaded more 'grass-roots' strategies such as pursuing negotiations with Nigerien jihadi fighters via local community brokers, and integrating certain community-based militias into the security forces. Such mediation and reintegration strategies constitute a long-standing practice understood as a context-sensitive Nigerien pattern of conflict resolution, historically supported by local communities themselves.²⁹

However, in 2021 in the face of unprecedented attacks on Nigerien forces in terms of numbers of fatalities which occurred in the two years prior to Bazoum's election (see [Figure 1](#)), it was difficult to convince the FDS that dialogue and integration was an appropriate way forward. Indeed, dialoguing with jihadi groups was viewed by many in the FDS as a controversial policy at best, or a betrayal at worst. This statement of a junior Nigerien Armed Forces (FAN) officer is a common refrain, especially amongst the rank and file: 'the terrorists kill our men and the local population. Dialoguing with them cannot happen.'³⁰ To demonstrate good faith in negotiations, on occasion Bazoum's government released accused or suspected jihadi fighters that had been arrested by the FDS, actions they viewed as an affront to their war effort. Tiani belaboured this point during his speech to the nation on 28th July. Disagreements on the value of dialogue ultimately led to contradictory actions by Bazoum's office and the FDS such as when

28. Laura Berlingozzi and Ed Stoddard, 'Assessing misaligned counterinsurgency practice in Niger and Nigeria', *The International Spectator* 55, 4 (2020), pp. 37–53.

29. Abdoulaye Mohamadou, 'État, pouvoirs locaux et insécurité au Sahel: L'intégration différenciée des communautés locales dans la construction de l'état-nation au Niger et au Mali', *Afrique Contemporaine* 265, 1 (2018), pp. 77–97.

30. Interview, Nigerien Armed Forces lieutenant colonel, Niamey, 21 October 2022; similar views were expressed in other interviews with members of FAN. Interview, Niamey-based supplier to Nigerien Armed Forces, Niamey, 24 October 2022; interview, brother of two FAN soldiers stationed in Ouallam, Niamey, 22 February 2023.

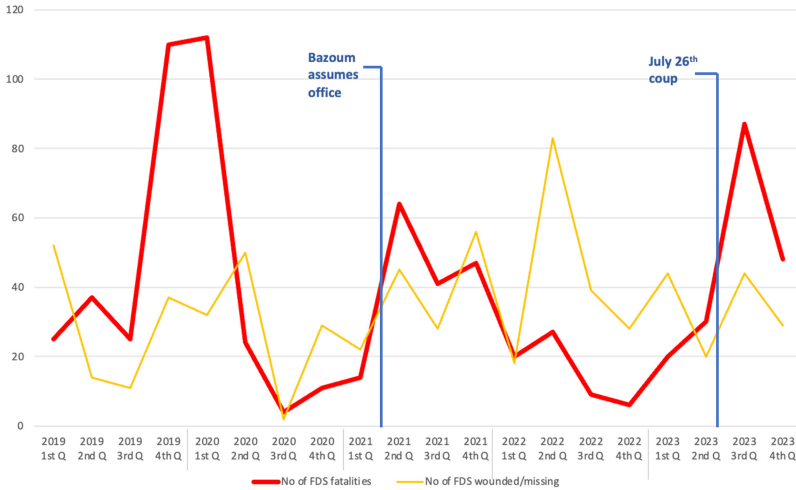


Figure 1 Fatalities and wounded/missing members of Nigerien Security Forces (FDS) from attacks by jihadi groups 2019–2023.^a

Source: ACLED data.

^a All attacks by jihadi groups and ‘presumed’ jihadi groups were included. Jihadi group claims of fatalities were only included if independently verified; according to our FDS interlocutors, the fatalities were likely much higher since wounded FDS members often do not receive life-saving medical treatment following attacks, and those that go missing after attacks are often never relocated and presumed dead.

French and Nigerien forces bombed a meeting of Islamic State (IS-Sahel) leaders on the Niger/Mali border in January 2023, killing a high-ranking commander who, at the time, was involved in dialogue with the government.³¹ Unsurprisingly, negotiations broke down resulting in a subsequent increase in attacks by IS-Sahel in the Tillabéry and Tahoua regions in the months that followed.

As the armed conflict evolved and grafted onto a matrix of diverse localized conflicts, Bazoum and government allies also pursued a strategy of integrating members of some community-based militias that had organized to protect their communities into the FDS. The former argued that local people familiar with these regions were best suited to serve as the frontline defence against jihadi forces operating in those areas.³² Although

31. Interview with HACP advisor, Tahoua, 14 January 2023; Interview with Fulani activist, Niamey, 25 February 2023.

32. Interviews, HACP officials, Niamey October 2022, January and February 2023.

logically sound, this strategy also produced frustrations within the FDS over what they viewed as inconsistencies in government support for some militia groups, which tended to be dominated by particular ethnic communities over others. For example, 600 members of a militia group, formed in Tillia in 2021 and dominated by the Tamasheq³³ community, were integrated into the National Guard over the course of 2022. In contrast, only 105 members of a militia group, formed in Banibangou in 2019 and dominated by the Djerma community, were integrated into the National Guard in June 2023. This integration happened some time after a peace agreement had been signed between local Djerma and Fulani communities. No such agreement was signed in Tillia. As a result, many within the FDS argued that Tamasheq militias were being given preferential treatment. One reason why it was possible to organize the integration of the Tamasheq militia is because, as part of the Peace Accord agreed in 1995, there is an institutional pattern of integrating Tamasheq former combatants into the National Guard.³⁴ Until the 26 July coup, the Djerma recruits were not posted in their area of origin, leading to the perception that the Tamasheq had been given their own militia, trained and paid by the state, whereas other ethnic groups had not.³⁵ These perceptions fostered resentment among many in the army and the gendarmerie, corps that tend to be dominated by Hausa and Djerma groups.

Other issues connected to the integration of local militias added to such frustrations. For example, FAN units based in Tillia contested the integration of community militia into the National Guard, believing militia members to be criminals, bandits, or worse, that they could be complicit in local jihadi group activity that FAN units were meant to defend against.³⁶ Many military personnel were formally recruited, or who trained in Niger's military high schools (*Prytanée*), already perceived the National Guard as less professional than the rest of the FDS as a result of it being Niger's institutional mechanism for integrating former rebel combatants into the FDS. Given the National Guard's support for a French military intervention to release Bazoum, many leading CNSP officials feel justified in their distrust

33. People belonging to the Tamasheq community are colloquially known as 'Tuaregs'. We use the nomenclature that our Tamasheq interlocutors use when referring to themselves.

34. There were other considerations in explaining why the Banibangou militia was not offered integration into the FDS, but a full explanation of these dynamics is outside of the scope of this article.

35. Interview, member of Djerma lobby for the formation of Djerma militia groups, Niamey, 1 March 2022; Interview, former member of Nigerien Armed Forces, Niamey, 21 February 2022.

36. Members of the Tillia militia were acutely aware of the FAN's distrust of their group; Interview, integrated National Guard member from Tahoua region, Niamey, 24 October 2022; Interview, Tillia militia leader, Niamey, 25 October 2022.

of the corps 'as they were the ones who had prepared a riposte' to Tiani's coup.³⁷

Lastly, Bazoum's attempts to convince defectors from jihadi groups (*les repentis*), and people who had escaped zones controlled by jihadi groups (*les rescapés*) to accept integration into the FDS in order to facilitate the identification and future capture of jihadi forces was met with intense FDS suspicion. If the government's intention was to integrate jihadi group fighters after some sort of defection process into different corps of the FDS, this would mean that soldiers were expected to work with people who had killed, or were connected to people who had killed, their colleagues. Members of the FDS argued that the consequences of such arguably 'extrajudicial procedures' would fall hardest on ordinary soldiers on the frontlines, believing that released fighters would either act as informants for jihadi groups, or simply defect back to the insurgency.³⁸

Unresolved debates over international security partnerships

Perhaps the most divisive issue in Bazoum's counter-insurgency strategy was the decision to accept additional French troops on the ground in Niger. While there have been French troops in Niger since 2006 as part of the US-led Global War on Terror, until 2013 they were primarily there in a training capacity. In 2014, Niger agreed to host logistical and intelligence support operations for Barkhane, the regional French counterterrorism intervention. In 2022, following a breakdown in diplomatic and military relations between France and Mali, Bazoum's government authorized the redeployment of Barkhane to Niger, and for French troops to carry out operations on Nigerien soil under the command of the FAN. According to French military officials, the redeployment increased the number of French soldiers operating in Niger to 1,500 troops.³⁹

Bazoum initially rejected the idea of authorizing the deployment of additional French and European counter-terrorism forces but then changed course in 2022. This *volte-face* sparked discussions amongst Nigeriens about the French government's supposed manipulation of their country's head of state. Nevertheless, following an arguably perfunctory vote in Niger's National Assembly in April 2022 and consultations with senior military officials about how French forces should deploy in the country, an

37. Telephone interview, FAN general, 12 September 2023.

38. Interview, Nigerien government official, Niamey, 7 February 2023.

39. Interview with Forces Françaises du Sahel (FFS) Communications Officer, Niamey, 21 December 2022. There has nevertheless been confusion over the number of French troops operating in Niger as a result of diverse figures advanced in the media in the initial phases of the redeployment. See Nicholas Barotte, 'Au Sahel, Barkhane cherche ses marques', *Le Figaro*, 22 September 2022, <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/au-sahel-barkhane-cherche-ses-marques-20220922>> (27 October 2023).

agreement was reached wherein French forces would only operate in Niger under the command of the country's armed forces and would refrain from conducting unilateral military operations. Under this agreement, operations were planned by Niger's military command which would call on French forces to provide intelligence, logistics, and other forms of support jointly with the FAN.⁴⁰ As such, joint operations between FAN and French Forces were carried out under *Opération Almahou* throughout the Tillabéry region in late 2022 and early 2023, successfully targeting jihadi groups.

Despite these achievements, French cooperation with the FAN occurred in the context of a contested postcolonial relationship, the intensification of geopolitical rivalries between Russia and the West, and the failure of Barkhane to defeat jihadi insurgencies in the region. These dynamics combined to produce an intense paranoia within the FDS (especially among its lower ranks) about the 'real' purpose of the French military presence.⁴¹ While much of this paranoia is whipped up by disinformation of unknown local, regional or international provenance, there are nevertheless historical precedents that provide a logic for some of the conspiracy theories. The first Franco-Nigerien defence agreement signed in 1961, for example, linked French military presence with Niger's natural resources, stipulating that Niger should facilitate the storage of 'strategic raw materials' including oil and uranium for the benefit of the French armed forces.⁴² Under this agreement, Niger was required to prioritize France in the sale of its raw materials, after satisfying domestic needs. Some Nigeriens compare the current jihadi uprising with the Tamasheq rebellions in the 1990s and in 2007/2009. Since independence, French intelligence and parts of the military have maintained links with Tamasheq armed group leaders willing to cooperate.⁴³ When Tamasheq militants launched a rebellion in 1991, the French Foreign Intelligence Agency (DGSE) set up a liaison cell between

40. Telephone interview with Forces Françaises du Sahel (FFS) communications officer, 7 July 2022. See also *Le Monde*, 'Le Niger, "laboratoire" de la France pour sa nouvelle approche militaire en Afrique', 23 May 2023, <https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/05/23/le-niger-laboratoire-de-la-france-pour-sa-nouvelle-approche-militaire-en-afrique_6174456_3212.html> (27 October 2023).

41. Similar dynamics leading to a breakdown in relations between the French and the Malian military occurred in the context of *Operation Barkhane*. See Yvan Guichaoua, 'The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel', *International Affairs* 96, 4 (2020), pp. 895–911.

42. *Official Journal of the French Republic*, 'Accord de défense entre les Gouvernements de la République française, de la République de Côte-d'Ivoire, de la République du Dahomey et de la République du Niger', No 30, 5/6 February 1962, p1323; see also Aliou Mahamane, 'La naissance de l'armée nationale au Niger: 1961–1974', in Kimba Idrissa (ed), *Armée et Politique au Niger* (CODESRIA, Dakar, 2008), pp. 45–92.

43. Interview, former member of FAN, Niamey, 9 February 2023; Interview, security advisor at the French Embassy, Niamey, 23 December 2022.

the leaders of the rebellion and the Nigerien government.⁴⁴ Meanwhile French media, including Radio France International (RFI), often depicted the actions of Tamasheq armed groups as an uprising of nomadic peoples against a corrupt and repressive government.⁴⁵ In the 2007 rebellion led by the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice*, its representatives were given an audience at the French National Assembly.⁴⁶ While Tamasheq communities had genuine grievances, notably in the first rebellion in 1991, it also remains true that France repeatedly provided symbolic and strategic support for Tamasheq rebellions against the Nigerien government. There is no evidence that the French are supporting jihadi movements operating in Niger but its history of supporting previous uprisings means that these conspiracy theories seem probable to many in the FAN and Gendarmerie, corps that have historically seen most of their recruitment from communities living near the capital, and elsewhere in the south of the country.

The decision to accept the redeployment of French forces in Niger was not only symbolically problematic, it also complicated relations between Mali and Niger. Cross-border military coordination to track jihadi groups across the Mali-Niger border has always been difficult. Whenever pursued by the FDS in the Tillabéry or Tahoua regions, IS-Sahel fighters need only retreat across the Malian border to escape. Even before the Malian government's rift with France, military cooperation between Niger and Mali had been a daunting task due to the Malian Armed Forces' insufficient footprint at the border. As a FAN major colonel commented: 'joint operations would hardly ever happen'.⁴⁷ The lack of military presence in Burkina Faso's Sahel and East regions presents similar challenges. However, many within the FDS' rank and file assumed that Bazoum's acquiescence to the French government caused a reduction in cross-border military cooperation with Malian and Burkinabé neighbours, making their efforts to pursue terrorists virtually impossible. In March 2023, the then FAN chief of staff, General Salifou Mody travelled to Mali to negotiate authorization for the FAN to conduct military operations in Malian territory. On his return, Bazoum removed Mody as chief of staff and appointed him as Niger's ambassador to

44. Centre de doctrine d'emploi des forces (CDEF), '50 ans d'OPEX en Afrique 1964–2014', (Cahier de RETEX, Paris, September 2015); Emmanuel Gregoire, *Touaregs du Niger, Le destin d'un mythe* (Karthala, Paris, 1999).

45. Yvan Guichaoua and Mathieu Pellerin, *Faire la paix et construire l'état: Les relations entre pouvoir central et périphéries Sahéliennes au Niger et au Mali* (IRSEM, Paris, 2017).

46. Yvan Guichaoua, 'Circumstantial alliances and loose loyalties in rebellion making: The case of Tuareg insurgency in northern Niger (2007–2009)' (MICROCON Research Working Paper No. 20, 2009).

47. Interview, FAN major colonel, Niamey, 16 February 2023. Interestingly, intelligence-sharing cooperation continued even following the Franco-Malian rift, but still, more often than not, failed to produce operational follow-up by both militaries. Interview, FDS general, Niamey, 16 February 2023.

Saudi Arabia, a decision that FAN soldiers found difficult to understand as they saw increased collaboration with Mali as a priority in the fight against terrorism.⁴⁸ As a result, rumours of French meddling in Niger's military affairs spread rapidly across the FDS, social media platforms, and in civil society circles, with Bazoum being accused as yet another valet of France in Africa.

Of course, suspicion about France's military presence is far from uniform across the FDS. For example, one senior FAN officer noted that Barkhane forces produced 'non negligible' results in targeting high-level jihadi commanders, and that the French military in general provided important levels of training, material, and logistical support.⁴⁹ While not quite a glowing description of French successes, another senior FAN officer offered similarly reluctant recognition of the benefits of French military cooperation, and argued that in the short or medium term, its presence in Niger was indeed needed to counter the country's jihadi insurgencies.⁵⁰ Yet another senior officer argued that compared to American military support, French military cooperation was less rigid and more responsive to requests from the FAN hierarchy to engage in support of troops on the ground.⁵¹ A major colonel, for example, pointed out that most Nigerien military personnel were unaware of the finer details regarding the French forces' cooperation modalities with their Nigerien counterparts and that Nigerien soldiers 'that are in the field, operating with French soldiers know how much the French help them. But those that are in the garrisons that do not have experience working with the French are manipulated.'⁵² Still, even those who recognized the practical benefits that cooperation with French forces brought nevertheless struggled with the symbolism of French military presence in Niger. As another major colonel ruefully commented '[a military partnership with the French] constantly reminds us of our dependence, even if we have technically been independent for 60 some odd years. It is demoralizing not only in our society, but also within the FDS.'⁵³ At different times since the 1970s, elements of the FDS have worked to extricate Niger's security institutions from the influence of its former colonial power. Accepting French troops back into Niger in 2022 represented for many a step back on the country's decolonial journey.

48. Some FAN senior officers have instead advanced unconfirmed reports that Bazoum replaced Mody for having protected lower-ranking officers from military tribunals connected to their involvement in abuses committed against civilians in the Téra department (Tillabéry region). Telephone interview, FAN general, 12 August 2023.

49. Interview, FAN major colonel, Niamey, 16 February 2023.

50. Interview, FAN major colonel, Niamey, 10 February 2023.

51. Interview, FAN general, Niamey, 21 February 2023.

52. Interview, FAN major colonel, Niamey, 24 February 2023.

53. Interview, FAN major colonel, Niamey, 16 February 2023.

Conclusion

Most theories of the 26 July 2023 coup rely on patrimonialism as the explanatory factor, but the success of this unlikely coup is difficult to explain through an exclusive focus on rent-seeking and the rent distribution strategies of the country's political and military elite. While political events in Africa are often analyzed through the lens of patron–client relations,⁵⁴ in the case of Niger's 2023 coup, ideological convictions about national sovereignty became as important as material incentives that either the political class or a partnership with external partners could offer. To cement support for the CNSP across the rank and file, coup leaders emphasized the need to terminate initiatives involving non-state armed actors and to revoke defence agreements with France, even though the French military was arguably the external partner that offered them the most operational support. Many senior officers also supported these moves, or at least are presently unwilling to admit the contrary for fear of being removed from their positions or being 'massacred by the population'.⁵⁵

We stress that in the days following Tiani's blockade of the presidential palace, coup leaders worked to link support for the coup with the idea of Niger regaining its sovereignty by renouncing French military cooperation. This dream of a reinvigorated sovereignty became intoxicating both in the streets and in the barracks. In this sense, our argument dovetails with explanations regarding coup outcomes being the result of intra-military coordination games without denying the role of rent-seeking practices amongst some of Niger's military and political elite. In order to create their *fait accompli*, the CNSP's senior leaders deployed ideological arguments that few Nigeriens would publicly disagree with and which would yield nearly universal support, thereby making this unlikely coup attempt a success. Whether this sovereigntist ideology can continue to sustain support across the FDS for the coup leaders in the face of crippling regional sanctions, the suspension of security assistance, and an increased rate of deadly attacks against the FDS by jihadi fighters, remains to be seen.

54. Thandika Mkandawire, 'Neopatrimonialism and the political economy of economic performance in Africa', *World Politics* 67, 3 (2015), pp. 563–612.

55. Telephone interview, FAN major colonel, 23 August 2023.

