



# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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SNAPSHOT

## After Mali Comes Niger

West Africa's Problems Migrate East

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Last month, the French army's rapid advance into northern Mali and the timely deployment of troops from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) seemed to result in a swift victory over Islamist and Tuareg militants there. Equally important, however, was the Islamist and Tuareg militants' hasty withdrawal into northeastern Mali. With France planning to pull its troops out of the country as soon as March, Mali will almost certainly be turned into an ECOWAS trusteeship. The most likely upshot is not a neat end to the conflict but, rather, a migration of the problem into neighboring Niger.

Parts of the Tuareg leadership, which signed a power-sharing agreement in March 2012 with three jihadist militias -- al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa -- have already fled across the unguarded Nigerien border, where they will try to regroup. Given

Niger's weak government structures, they also pose a serious security threat to the country as a whole.

Niger presents an appealingly easy target. For one, despite several attempts at reform by President Mahamadou Issoufou, who was elected in April 2011, Niger's secular political elite lacks legitimacy in the eyes of its largely illiterate, rural, and deeply religious population. Numerous failed attempts at democratization and rampant corruption by previous governments have plagued the country for over two decades. Among the population, this troubled legacy has fostered a general sense of alienation from the capital.

Large parts of the Nigerien army, meanwhile, are opposed to the notion of civilian rule. Ever since it was pushed out of power in 1991, the army leadership has cultivated a deep mistrust of the civilian elite among all military ranks. Consumed with hatred for the Tuareg following two major military campaigns against them (1990-1995 and 2007-2009, respectively), the Nigerien army has overthrown three civilian governments since 1993. Although recent coup attempts in 2011 and 2012 proved amateurish and lacked sufficient support among both the armed forces and the population, they indicate long-standing tensions between parts of the military and the civilian elites.

Despite a 2009 peace accord with the government, Niger's Tuareg clans remain marginalized economically and disenfranchised politically. Although in 2009 the central government agreed to channel more resources to the Tuareg, this promise has clearly not been kept. The Tuareg thus have remained poorer than the rest of the population. The current prime minister's Tuareg ancestry should not distract from the fact that the community lacks genuine political representation in the capital.

Given that the Tuareg are a nomadic people, no one knows exactly how many there are -- but the best estimates suggest that

there are roughly 1.2 million Tuareg in total, with most of them living in Mali and Niger. Issoufou, for one, has explicitly warned about the threat of a new Tuareg rebellion in the north. The government's announcement of a \$2.5 billion aid package for the Tuareg-populated areas at the height of the French intervention was likely an attempt to head off such an insurgency.

Meanwhile, in southern Niger, unguarded checkpoints along the border with Nigeria have allowed for an influx of radical Islamic preachers, who have sought to win over the population by promising to provide public goods that the state has not. Boko Haram, a jihadist militant organization based in Nigeria, and homegrown radical Islamic sects, such as the Izala movement, operate well-known outposts in Niger's southern cities of Diffa, Maradi, and Zinder. Their operatives clash regularly with Nigerien security forces.

In short, Niger's domestic political scene remains highly volatile. And the fuse that ignites it could well be the inflow of rebels from Mali. These rebels could try to foment an uprising of either Islamists or Tuareg -- or both. The socioeconomic predicament of the Tuareg in northern Niger and the growing influence of Islamist groups in the south provide fertile ground for such an attempt.

The outbreak of wider unrest in Niger could drag the West into a long-term military engagement in the Sahel region. France gets roughly three-quarters of its energy from uranium mined in northern Niger, near the city of Arlit. Unsurprisingly, France has already deployed soldiers to protect those resources, and China is said to have done the same at its uranium mine near Azalik. Niger is also an oil exporter, and production is expected to grow significantly in coming months. Rebel movements and Islamic militants are within reach of Niger's mines and oil fields, which they could use to fund their rebellion. Further attacks on Nigerian and Algerian territory remain a distinct possibility.

The West should not trust the Nigerien army to manage such a conflict on its own. Its upper ranks were appointed by the previous civilian government -- based on political loyalty, not merit. As a result, the army lacks professionalism and adequate training. And the country's already weak forces will soon be further depleted: Niger has offered ECOWAS 20 percent of its military to either join in the operation in Mali or go on standby.

ECOWAS' ability to police the region is also highly questionable. First, previous ECOWAS missions -- in Sierra Leone and Liberia -- have proved touch and go. In both cases, mistrust and disunity plagued relationships among the military leadership. These ECOWAS operations also suffered from inadequate resources, including a lack of weapons. Ultimately, the only reason they were effective was a strong British military presence. But with France's withdrawal from Mali imminent, such a force will be lacking in the Sahel.

Moreover, the various African countries that have pledged support for the military engagement in Mali lack the necessary finances for even that war. They have already asked Western donors for \$1 billion in aid, and thus far the West has provided only half that amount. It will be no easy task for them to open another front. Furthermore, roughly a third of all African soldiers committed to the Mali mission come from Chad, which is not an ECOWAS member. Although the United Nations' mandate for Mali refers to "an African-led International Support Mission" and therefore permits any African nation to join the fray, a longer-term, multilateral mission would ultimately raise the question of whether ECOWAS or Chad is in charge.

Unfortunately, however, outside help does not appear to be on its way. The United Kingdom and Germany do not seem to grasp the importance of the Sahel to European energy security. Germany has dedicated only three aircraft to the Mali campaign and the United Kingdom has sent 240 "not for combat" soldiers. In the

United States, meanwhile, President Barack Obama lacks a comprehensive African strategy, let alone a plan for the Sahel. Drone policing -- the Obama administration's preferred tactic -- provides little more than a short-term fix. If the West wants to prevent the Sahel from falling hostage to Tuareg and Islamist militants, longer-term military and financial engagement is urgently required.

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