

After Niger coup, France worries over Russia's influence, impact on North Africa

France is increasingly worried that the military putsch in Niger will push the country into Russia's lap.

GABORONE, Botswana — An ongoing military coup in Niger is threatening French and American efforts to combat Sahel and North Africa-originated jihadism. Russian flags waved by local Nigerians shortly after the takeover illustrate whose side the rebels are on in the battle of influence between Moscow and the Europeans.

Niger became a key regional country for France following the 2021 military coup in Mali and the ensuing decision by Bamako to sever security ties with Paris. Having championed the battle against Islamist extremists' groups across Mali for several years, France deployed some 4,500 troops in the north of the country in the framework of Operation Barkhane. The contingent was forced to leave Mali after the severing of security relations.

A familiar scene on a smaller scale took shape last February in Burkina Faso when the Burkinabe army announced the end of cooperation with French troops present in the country in the framework of Operation Sabre. The transition government established in Ouagadougou after the September 2022 military coup had decided to abandon the defense accords linking the two countries.

Pushed out of Mali and of Burkina Faso, Paris decided to lean on Niger (alongside its long cooperation with Djibouti) in its efforts to fight jihadist groups increasingly present in the Sahel region, in North Africa and even in central and south Africa, including al-Qaeda affiliated groups, African Islamic State branches and Boko Haram.

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