

Nigerien protesters wave Russian flags, attack French Embassy



International Desk

Thousands of supporters of the junta that took over Niger in a coup earlier this week marched through the streets of the capital, Niamey, on Sunday waving Russian flags, chanting the name of the Russian president, and forcefully denouncing former colonial power France. The protesters marched through the city to the French Embassy, where a door was lit on fire, according to someone who

was at the embassy when it happened and videos seen by the AP. Black smoke could be seen rising from across the city. The Nigerien army broke up the crowd of protesters. Russian mercenary group Wagner is already operating in neighboring Mali, and Russian President Vladimir Putin would like to expand his country's influence in the region. However, it is unclear yet whether the new junta leaders will move toward Moscow or stick with Ni-

ger's Western partners. Days after the coup, uncertainty is mounting about Niger's future, with some calling out the junta's reasons for seizing control. President Mohamed Bazoum was democratically elected two years ago in Niger's first peaceful transfer of power since independence from France in 1960. The mutineers said they overthrew him because he wasn't able to secure the nation against growing violence.

France has 1,500 soldiers in the country who conduct joint operations with the Nigeriens. The United States and other European countries have helped train the nation's troops. On Sunday France condemned all violence against diplomatic compounds, whose security is the responsibility of the host state, said a statement by the government. The attack follows France's move on Saturday to suspend all development and financial aid for Niger.



Nigeriens, some holding Russian flags, participate in a march called by supporters of coup leader Gen. Tchiani in Niamey, Niger, on Sunday, July 30, 2023.
● SAM MEDNICK/AP

West African bodies issue ultimatum

Regional bodies, including the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have also denounced the coup. Some taking part in Sunday's rally warned them to stay away. The African Union has is-

sued a 15-day ultimatum to the junta in Niger to reinstall the country's democratically elected government. ECOWAS is holding an emergency summit Sunday in Abuja, Nigeria.

The 15-nation ECOWAS bloc has unsuccessfully tried to restore democracies in nations where the military took power in recent years. Four nations are run by military regimes in West and Central Africa, where there have been nine successful or attempted coups since 2020. If ECOWAS imposes economic sanctions on Niger, which is what normally happens during coups, it could have a deep impact on Nigeriens, who live in the third-poorest country in the world, according to the latest UN data. Heads of the West African economic bloc ECOWAS, the eight-member West African Economic, and Monetary Union could suspend Niger from its institutions, cut off the country from the regional central bank and financial market, and close borders, according to Reuters. However, in a televised address Saturday, Brig. Gen. Mohamed Toumba, one of the soldiers who ousted Bazoum, accused the meeting of making a "plan of aggression" against Niger and said the country would defend itself. The junta issued a second statement on Saturday night inviting citizens in the capital take to the streets to protest against ECOWAS and show support for the new military leaders.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Israeli MP: Normalization with Saudis not imminent



● AFP

REUTERS - A top Israeli lawmaker said on Sunday that any forging of relations with Saudi Arabia does not appear imminent, citing what he described as sticking points in negotiations currently being held between Riyadh and US mediators.

"I think it's too early to talk about a deal being in the works," Yuli Edelstein, head of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee and a senior member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, told Israel's Army Radio.

Senegal's opposition leader charged with conspiracy



AP - Senegal's opposition leader Ousmane Sonko has been charged with conspiracy against the state and calls for insurrections among other offenses, the public prosecutor said Saturday.

The announcement comes weeks after Sonko was convicted on separate charges of corrupting youth and sentenced to two years in prison, which ignited deadly protests across the nation, where at least 23 people were killed and dozens injured.

Palestinian factions meet in Egypt to reunite, reconcile

Palestinian factions kicked off a meeting Sunday in Egypt to discuss reconciliation efforts as violence in the occupied West Bank surged between Israel and Palestinian militants. The main attending groups, Hamas and Fatah, have been split since 2007. With repeated reconciliation attempts having failed, expectations for the one-day meeting are low, AP wrote.

Another key group playing a central role in the fighting with Israel, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, boycotted the gathering to protest the detentions by the Palestinian Authority of its members, according to the group's leader, Ziyad al-Nakhala. According to the official Palestinian news agency Wafa, the gathering in the Egyptian city of el-Alamein on the Mediterranean Sea was

discussing "ways to restore national unity and end the division". The meeting comes amid soaring violence in the West Bank, where Fatah group is based and exerts limited self-rule. Israel has been staging near-nightly raids in Palestinian areas of the territory, especially in areas where Abbas' security forces have less of a foothold.



Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (L) leads a meeting of reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas in Egypt on July 30, 2023.
● Wafa

No 'big deal' ...

These conditions include a joint defense agreement, the establishment of a peaceful nuclear program, and the acquisition of advanced weaponry. It appears that Israel is playing the role of mediator in this plan, but it's evident that both Saudi Arabia and the United States are driven by their own national interests in the matter. For Saudi Arabia, the top priority is obtaining a security guarantee against potential invasion. During Donald Trump's tenure, Riyadh offered various contracts and concessions to the US, but it failed to address its security concerns.

Ensuring security in the West Asian region is also crucial for the US, as it observes Arab countries increasingly gravitating toward China. The numerous contracts China signs with Arab nations represent missed opportunities for the US, as Saudi Arabia has become China's gateway to West Asia, further bolstering Beijing's influence in the region. As a result, the Americans are keen on preserving Saudi Arabia as a strategic ally. However, the prospect of fulfilling Saudi Arabia's conditions for the deal seems unlikely. One of the key demands is NATO's support as a security guar-



US President's Middle East advisor Brett McGurk (L) met with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud on April 13, 2023.
● SAUDI FOREIGN MINISTRY

antee. Despite the existence of a bilateral security and military agreement between Saudi Arabia and the United States, the US has announced since 2011 that it will only engage in wars through NATO, ruling out independent military actions. It is improbable that NATO would provide such support to Saudi Arabia, especially considering that the alliance has even

rejected Ukraine's membership, despite it being a European country. Consequently, the Saudi security concerns and their main condition might not materialize. Moreover, Joe Biden's administration has shown reluctance to uphold the commitments made by the Trump administration to Saudi Arabia, leading Riyadh to be cautious about

entering into any bilateral security agreements with the United States. Currently, Saudi Arabia is closely monitoring developments in Palestine and Israel while emphasizing the need for security guarantees. Due to its strategic influence in Muslim and Arab nations, Saudi Arabia has taken an interest in advocating for the establishment of two independent states, one for Palestine and another for Israel. Additionally, Riyadh opposes Israel's policy of continued settlement construction in Palestinian territories. However, the realization of these requests from Saudi Arabia by Israel, as well as Israel's acceptance of Saudi Arabia's pursuit of nuclear technology, appear to be unlikely.

Israel, for its part, is concerned about Saudi Arabia acquiring nuclear know-how, considering it a significant Muslim country with considerable influence in the Islamic world. Israeli leaders understand that Arab nations often experience political changes, making them wary of allowing Saudi Arabia to obtain nuclear capabilities. Ultra-orthodox factions in Israel, who firmly believe in an inevitable war between Muslims and Israel, vehemently oppose any move toward nuclearization in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Israeli extremists have not forgotten the substantial financial aid Saudi Arabia provided during the 1967 Six-Day War, when it supported efforts to defeat Israel.

In contrast to Friedman's narrative, the idea of a big deal between the involved parties seems unlikely, mainly because the Biden administration recognizes the complexities and obstacles that such a plan would face. The Biden administration is more focused on managing the situation and buying time to maintain some level of control over developments in the Middle East, which have completely spiraled out of its control. The United States' primary priorities currently revolve around the conflict in Ukraine and its ongoing rivalry with China. President Biden aims to prevent Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries from rapidly aligning themselves with China, Russia, and Iran.