

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Recent coups in West Africa and the Sahel region, HC 1830

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Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Liam Byrne; Neil Coyle; Henry Smith; Royston Smith.

Questions 1–47

Witnesses

I: Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG, Professor of Practice in Diplomacy, Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS University of London; Aneliese Bernard, Founder and Director, Strategic Stabilization Advisors; Aanu Adeoye, West Africa Correspondent, *Financial Times*.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Nicholas Westcott CMG, Aneliese Bernard and Aanu Adeoye.

Chair: Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee, a one-off hearing on what has been taking place in west Africa and the Sahel over the past few months. I thank all three of our witnesses who will be giving evidence. Could I ask you to introduce yourselves, starting with Dr Westcott?

Dr Westcott: My name is Nick Westcott. I was previously the director of the Royal African Society, after spending some years as a diplomat. I am now professor of practice in diplomacy at SOAS University of London.

Aanu Adeoye: My name is Aanu Adeoye. I am the west Africa correspondent for the *FT* and am based in Lagos. Previously I was with Chatham House, where I was a researcher on Russia-Africa relations.

Aneliese Bernard: My name is Aneliese Bernard. I am the director of Strategic Stabilization Advisors, a risk-based consultancy in Washington DC, primarily focused on west Africa. Previously, I was with the US Department of State; I was based in Niger for several years and Mali before that.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you all ever so much. Before we get into the wider context and the strategic implications, I would like to start by asking about the news we heard over the weekend about the Alliance of Sahel States, which is an agreement between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger—all military coup countries. Essentially, they agreed their own version of article 5 whereby an attack on one would be considered an attack on all and would mean a military response from all three countries.

Can you talk us through that? It would be really helpful to understand how realistic it is, what the impetus is for acting in this way, whether they are essentially just trying to deter ECOWAS military activity, and where you see it going from here.

Dr Westcott: I think it shows two things. The first is that the states, particularly Niger, take seriously the suggestion by ECOWAS that it would try to restore democracy and President Bazoum, who was ousted, by whatever means necessary.

Secondly, I doubt whether they would be able to deliver a united military response in return, but it signals a very firm political will not to be bulldozed by the threats of force. At the moment, I think there are now the beginnings of a negotiating process between ECOWAS and the military junta in Niger, but this is just another bargaining chip in that process.

Aneliese Bernard: I think there is quite a bit of swagger with the announcement of the Alliance of Sahel States. At this moment, all three countries rely mostly on foreign aid for both security and development, and it seems incredibly unlikely that they will be able to galvanise and mobilise those resources for cross-border intervention on behalf of Niger.



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Even if it did happen—which would be wild, frankly—we are talking about leaving absent parts of countries, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, that are currently ostensibly controlled by jihadist groups. They would be risking a huge security vacuum if they actually mobilised something like that.

The final piece of this is that it really cuts Niger off from its trade partnerships and diplomatic relationships with countries to the north and south, and obviously to the east with Chad. There is a lot to lose by fomenting some kind of military alliance that would actually mobilise at this point. I can get into more details later.

Q2 Chair: Aanu, in terms of what has led us to this situation—you may also want to reflect on the alliance—how much is it because of a western over-focus on counter-terrorism in the region and not enough of a focus on good political governance?

Over the weekend, I met with Ghanaian, Nigerian and Benin MPs. They were very clear with me that the reasoning behind what has taken place has to do with the arbitrary borders that were created a long time ago, competing interests in those countries and, essentially, a failure to have governance that allows people to feel represented and to have a voice. Is that a fair representation of what has taken us to where we are today?

Aanu Adeoye: Yes, I think it is. Just one point on the alliance: the parameters are not quite clear. For example, it does not say what would happen if there were a counter-coup in any of these countries. Would Mali come to defend Niger if there were a counter-coup? These are conversations that people in the military in these countries are having—especially when you know that Burkina Faso and Mali are the result of counter-coups, for example. If someone in the military were to stage another coup, would this alliance come to the aid of any of these countries, or is this just a response to the ECOWAS threat?

In terms of focusing too much on counter-terrorism, huge swathes of a lot of these countries, particularly Mali and Burkina, are controlled by insurgent groups, as I think Aneliese said. Many people, especially in northern Mali for example, do not have the presence of the state. The northern city of Timbuktu has been under a blockade for more than a month now, and food and aid are not getting in. People have this sense of being neglected by the central Government, and this absence of the state is the reason why a lot of these jihadi groups are proliferating.

The other thing is that we have to be frank that the crisis in these countries cannot be solved only militarily. There has to be some form of political or diplomatic engagement with some of these groups, which many people might find distasteful. It is very interesting that in Niger President Bazoum was engaging in dialogue with some of those groups in a way that did not sit right with some people in the military, who accused him of releasing terrorists, for example. He realised that there had to be some dialogue with those groups. It is important not to look at it just from a counter-terrorism perspective; there is a need for strong institutions and the presence of the state in so many of the neglected regions.



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Q3 **Chair:** Of the three countries that have come together—Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger—is Niger the leading partner, or is that too much of a simplification?

Dr Westcott: I think that is a simplification. There are elements of all three. They wish to have political solidarity because they feel under duress from the African Union and ECOWAS, so I think that all three are complicit. There are also foreign countries with an interest in those countries showing solidarity.

To add to what Aanu said, the terrorist threat is very real. We should not forget that in 2012 and 2013, jihadists almost captured Bamako and would have taken over the whole state of Mali had there not been a military intervention against them. Aanu is also completely right, however, that military means alone will never manage that.

The problem is that coups do nothing to help. We have seen that the tentative peace process begun in 2015 in Mali has just broken down, because the coup leaders have not respected its terms, and therefore there is now a new and additional military threat to the Government in Bamako from the Azawad movement up north.

Q4 **Chair:** Yes, the Azawad—Henry wants to go into that in a moment.

Some interlocutors I have met suggest that this is not about jihadists; it is a nationalist movement, and it is being misrepresented as a jihadist rather than a nationalist movement—I see Aanu is nodding his head. Dr Westcott, will you comment on that, before I move to Aanu?

Dr Westcott: Yes. Each country has its own political mix. In Mali, there has always been a strong separatist movement in the north among the Tuareg, who felt fundamentally disadvantaged and marginalised in the political process. That is true, and it has always underpinned a rebellion that has been going on for 30 or 40 years, on and off, more or less since independence—so yes, there is a nationalist movement there. You cannot say the same in Niger, where the Government was quite inclusive: the President himself was of Arab background and Tuaregs were included in the Government. There, the immediate motive for the coup was different.

Three underlying factors are encouraging coups. First, the military take over because they can. Institutions are weak and all those countries are relatively centralised. Where governance is more decentralised, as in Kenya, Nigeria or South Africa, coups are much less likely to happen.

Secondly, some of the Governments lack legitimacy. That was true in Mali and a little in Burkina Faso, because the civilian democratic Government could not assure security, but it was not true in Niger. However, it is true in Gabon, where we have seen another one, and in Sudan, further east, where again there was a rising against the military rule. It is the lack of legitimacy of those rulers that stimulates people sometimes to support a coup intervention.

The last reason is that all these countries are under tremendous economic and social pressure because of climate change and demographic growth.



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They just cannot create enough economic growth quickly enough to provide jobs, particularly for the young men, who will therefore look for some other means of making a living.

Chair: Aanu, do you want to come in?

Aanu Adeoye: Yes. The coups in those countries are not of the same type; there are different reasons behind each of them.

In Gabon, as was mentioned, it was because the Government lacked legitimacy. The same family had been in power for 56 years, and people supported the coup.

In Niger, it looks like it was an intra-elite dispute that got out of hand. If you look at the identities of the coup leaders in Mali and Burkina Faso, they were mostly young men in their 30s who were in the special forces—the people actually fighting the jihadists. In Niger, that was done by members of the presidential guard who for some reason decided to move against the President. A lot of these coups, despite happening in the same timeframe, have various underlying reasons that led to them.

Finally, why do we keep seeing these coups? It is because coups are contagious. If you are a military leader in Niger, and you have seen that people in Mali and Burkina Faso have gotten away with it with little repercussion, there is very little deterrent for you if you are interested in doing a coup. Coups are contagious. People see that there is little international reaction beyond a few statements at the beginning; eventually, everyone starts finding a way to work with them, so these regimes become normalised. The regime in Mali has become entrenched, and it is the same in Burkina Faso. We are seeing the same trend in Niger. That is probably what is going to happen.

Q5 **Henry Smith:** We obviously have an expert panel, because you have essentially answered a lot of the questions that I was going to ask about why you think there has been democratic backsliding in the Sahel.

More specifically, I am interested in getting your thoughts on something. Aanu, you were just saying how coups d'état become almost normalised as a way of changing Governments. What role could the UK FCDO play to better help and support democratisation and alternative routes to that of coups being seen as a way of Governments changing?

Dr Westcott: You are quite right that there is a major geostrategic question of whether the process of democratisation that accelerated from the 1990s onwards has gone into reverse. Personally, I do not like the term “backsliding”, because no democracy is perfect; it is a question of whether it is working. In many of these countries, democracy was introduced but was quite imperfect. That is perfectly normal. It is a question of whether it can gradually improve itself—we have seen that in some African countries—or whether it remains precarious and is therefore easily overthrown.



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It is in the nature of democracies to promise a little more than you can sometimes deliver. In Africa, people may feel, "We have elected this Government. All the money seems to have gone towards corruption. My life has not improved; the climate has not got any better. I am going to happily take it out on the Government. If somebody else comes along and promises me more, I will go with that."

The question for the FCDO and the British Government is what we can do to reinforce those Governments who are trying to move their democracies in the right direction. I think it is true that we have not been doing enough to back those Governments where there are genuine efforts. They are never perfect; you will find corruption and some degree of suppression of free speech in many of them, but some are making big efforts. We need to be doing more to support those, not just in governance but in getting their economies going in ways that will enable them to create jobs and reduce the temptation for people to say, "Let's chuck out these democrats. Somebody else will do a better job."

- Q6 **Henry Smith:** Do you feel that perhaps one of the reasons why the UK Government have not been as engaged in this region is that traditionally the former colonial power, in most but not all of these countries, is France? Do you think that means that maybe we focus more on those countries in Africa and elsewhere in the world that were part of the British empire?

Dr Westcott: There is a very interesting contrast between anglophone and francophone countries. We have to remember that anglophone countries went through a wave of coups and civil wars in the '60s, '70s and even '80s—you will remember Sierra Leone and Uganda. A lot of anglophone countries went through that process of coups, military Governments and authoritarian dictators. They came out the other side and said, "Right, that didn't work, so let's try this democracy idea—perhaps that will work a bit better," and we have seen a growing stability in countries such as Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana.

Francophone countries, in the Sahel in particular, are often very small economies and very centralised—such was the French tradition. Many of them had very long-lived leaders who were backed by France because they were friendly to France. That has developed into a sort of widespread conspiracy theory that France is running these puppet regimes and extracting resources, which was probably true 20 years ago but has been much less true recently. Nevertheless, France's physical presence, visibility and intervention have made it a focus for protest in a way that the British Government have not as visibly or strongly been. I think anglophone countries feel that they are not under threat of being manipulated by the UK any more, partly because we have retreated a lot.

- Q7 **Henry Smith:** Aneliese, could you give your opinion on the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's interaction with the region, and what the UK Government might be able to do to be more effective?



Aneliese Bernard: I would not say that I am an expert on the FCDO's engagement in west Africa, but I have been working on quite a few FCDO-funded projects at this point and I think the difference between those projects specifically and how the US and other European partners are engaging right now is that there is a lot of research and knowledge capture taking place. That is an incredibly smart and strategic move right now because—I was going to say this before about what can be done to try to at least stop the erosion of democracy in these countries—we need to better understand these countries and the pluralistic history and make-up of their populations. That is something that is pretty absent from not just post-colonial relationships with these countries but the current era. Having worked in the US embassy in Niger, I found it striking that people did not really understand the difference between the Zarma, the Hausa and the Tuaregs, for example. That is clearly hitting a ceiling in terms of what these countries are willing to engage with.

The other piece to this, and potentially a space where the FCDO might be interested, is that one of the most powerful tools that is basically disrupting everything that has been going into these countries in terms of security assistance, development and governance work, is disinformation. That disinformation may or may not be controlled by certain great powers. I know I am jumping ahead to some of the questions that will be asked later, but I do think that what we saw in Niger, and why that got so much popular support so quickly, was because of the disinformation that had been rallied around the junta regarding its desire to throw off the yoke of French colonial intervention, when really what we know—or at least the evidence that we have so far—is that the individuals who carried out the coup were actually just trying to cover up some inherent and widespread corruption that was taking place within the Government itself. It is not the popular support that you saw even in Mali and Burkina, for example, at the beginning of those coups. I don't know whether that really answered your question.

Q8 **Henry Smith:** No, no—that is very helpful. Finally, Aanu, what is your perspective on the UK's CSSF programme in the Sahel region in terms of helping to promote political stabilisation?

Aanu Adeoye: One point that I want to make clear about the democratic backsliding in the Sahel—this is from talking to people in Mali and Burkina Faso especially—is that people think that there is some western hypocrisy in the types of coup that great powers condemn. The example that everyone points to is that of Chad. In Chad, the president died on the battlefield and his son took power immediately, when according to the constitution it should have been the leader of the National Assembly. For a variety of very convenient reasons, no one, from the US to France or the African Union, has called that a coup. People in Mali and Burkina Faso are saying, "Why are we being treated differently?"

There is a sense that international organisations, the international community, pick and choose what type of unconstitutional transfer of power they condemn. On the point about strengthening democracy, we see that when their leaders change the constitution to run for third terms.



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That is not condemned enough, and people think there is hypocrisy on that front as well.

Aneliese mentioned a really good point about elites saying that they are trying to remove the yoke of French colonialism. That is smart on their part, because you have many people in the population—these countries are remarkably young; most people are under 20 or under 30—who are just learning about the history of French colonialism. They see a lot of French influence in their country, whereas if you go to anglophone countries, Britain's presence is not as heavy. Because of that, elites seize power and retrospectively fit the narrative that, "We are trying to break the yolk of French imperialism."

On the whole, it is very important for western powers to find a consistent message on how they deal with these coups; we cannot pick and choose. That message should also go to ECOWAS. They were more forceful in their response on Niger than they were to Mali or Burkina Faso, or even Guinea—the least talked-about coup since 2021. Consistent messaging on how to approach the coups is really important. I will leave it there.

Q9 Neil Coyle: Dr Westcott, can I come in quickly on something you mentioned about countries trying military and then coming up the other side? You specifically referenced Sierra Leone, where there was a British military intervention. Significant numbers of Sierra Leoneans came to the UK to escape the violence, including to my own constituency. I am concerned that we have had a presidential election in that country where the outcome does not necessarily reflect the vote. Do you see a role for the Foreign Office in untangling and helping to avoid domestic escalation of democratic backsliding or fears that I hear from constituents about violence, linked to what you have just said? Other experts are welcome to contribute.

Dr Westcott: It is noteworthy that in both Gabon and Guinea, which we have not mentioned yet, coups followed stolen elections or, in Guinea's case, a president who decided he wanted to stay on for a third term, despite the constitution. It seems to be a sad fact that people are very reluctant to leave power, so they have to be forced to leave power, one way or another. We try to find peaceful and democratic means to require that, but where that is not possible, there are not a lot of options. That does indeed underpin a fair bit of the instability.

People need to have sufficient faith in their democratic institutions if they are to have the legitimacy necessary for them to implement policies that generally will be beneficial. That is not easy to do; it takes quite a long time, particularly where you have a tradition of patron-clients and people elect somebody who will make sure they get some benefit from it. In the UK, we could take a very puritanical line and say, "We won't support anybody who has some dodgy processes," but we have to be careful that we do not provoke something worse.

It is a careful balancing act. I should declare an interest here, having been a British civil servant, a diplomat, in west Africa. It is a careful balancing



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act of encouraging civil society and helping to build institutions, while still calling out human rights abuses and distortions of the electoral process—trying to persuade people that it is in the long run self-defeating to manipulate the system, because you actually end up weakening the country and yourself.

- Q10 **Neil Coyle:** Aanu, how does that fit with what you were saying about not appearing to pick and choose what is condemned and what is not, because on the other side of that balance it looks like we are condoning someone who has not got the democratic support of the people of the country staying in office?

Aanu Adeoye: It is very interesting that you mentioned Sierra Leone as an example, because since the elections in June, opposition MPs have refused to sit in Parliament, saying the election was rigged. A lot of international organisations and very credible domestic organisations say that neither party won a clear majority and the election should have gone to a run-off. Because of that, there is gridlock in Sierra Leonean politics; the opposition MPs are refusing to sit. It is causing quite a ruckus in Sierra Leone. I don't think it has made the news internationally just yet.

It is very important for international powers to find a way to look at processes, because for the most part leaders think that all that matters is their getting into position. They think, "If I manage to somehow win an election—if we fabricate the results or whatever—people will eventually accept that we are the leaders of the country." We have seen this in Zimbabwe, for example: their elections are not particularly credible but, over time, they become accepted. As Dr Westcott said, it is a very important balancing act. How do you make sure that you condemn a process that is not right, a process that has been deemed unfair by many neutral observers, while also making sure that there is no rhetoric that allows people who want to do so to carry out a coup? It is difficult to find the middle ground: how do you condemn flawed processes, but also make sure that there is not some tacit support for unconstitutional transfers of power? That is the hard work that diplomats have to figure out.

Neil Coyle: Aneliese, do you want to come in on that, or can I come to you specifically on Niger?

Aneliese Bernard: I have just one point to make. I totally agree with both the other panellists that a lot of work that we do on the diplomacy, development and security sides does not necessarily get synchronised. It is time that donors started to really synchronise all three tracks of assistance, because oftentimes we condemn a political process from the diplomacy side of things, and it might even trigger the shutting off of security aid, but the development aid that is bolstering civil society to build governance, democratic representation and all those other things continues. It's like talking out of two sides of your mouth and it is certainly confusing, but it also does not create a clear message from the donor. That definitely needs to be cleaned up, so to speak.



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Dr Westcott: I have just one very quick point. What will often have the most influence on countries like Sierra Leone is high-level political engagement. We heard recently in Senegal lots of rumours—not without substance—that Macky Sall wanted to stay on for a third term, but eventually he stood down, partly because people he respected around the world rang him up and said, “Don’t do it. You will destabilise the country.” If the British Prime Minister had met the President of Sierra Leone, he might have a credible position from which to ring him up and say, “Look, it’s not in your country’s interest to do this. If you accept a run-off”—or whatever—“we will come in with support. But if you don’t, it’s going to be more difficult for me to justify doing that.” But you have to have that high-level political engagement to be able to pull off that trick.

- Q11 **Neil Coyle:** I believe the Foreign Secretary was there not long ago, but perhaps that is not high-level enough. To come back to the issue of Niger, there has been some discussion about how the circumstances there led to where we are now. I will go to you first, Aneliese, given your experience. What should the Foreign Office and the wider UK Government be doing in the immediate term—right now—in response to what is happening in Niger?

Aneliese Bernard: Diplomacy needs to continue. HMG should not be severing ties, nor should the US or other European partners. I want to say, without being inappropriate, that the way France went about first digging its heels in and then pulling out immediately did not look good. You always need to be cautious of what is being said by the people who are in power, even if you do not agree with how they got there. I think the UK should continue its role and continue negotiating. The US is clearly still doing this. I know it looks a little odd that the US has ostensibly made it seem like it is just continuing operations as usual, but it is important that we continue to engage this country and try to make sure that it remains the linchpin in the region, the last remaining bulwark of stability in the Sahel. It is a risk to cut off all communication and relationships. I would not do that.

- Q12 **Neil Coyle:** Aanu, I am tempted to come back to you, given the points you made about not looking like we are rewarding coups, or encouraging them elsewhere, if we respond by maintaining diplomatic relations and activity. Do you have any comments? Do you think a different response from the UK Government would be advisable at this stage?

Aanu Adeoye: As Aneliese said, it is important for diplomacy to continue. This might be a difficult thing for western countries to do, because they are all allies, but everyone has to figure out a way to engage with this in a way that might be different from what France wants. We have seen that the US is still engaging with the regime in Niger, even though it has said, “We don’t agree with this. We think President Bazoum is still the constitutionally elected leader of Niger.” Ultimately, we see that countries are trying to engage with the people who are in power now. There is a case for realism and saying, “Look, these guys have taken power.” It feels to me like the message coming out of Niamey is that they want to engage with anyone but France. For some reason, saying, “We’re not engaging



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with France,” plays to the gallery of the watching public, and they have inculcated that. They know that saying that they are not friends with France is a winning strategy with the local population.

Ultimately, the UK Government have to decide how they engage with this. It looks like ECOWAS, the regional bloc, is still engaging in diplomacy. We have seen talk of an invasion toned down. I don’t think that is likely now. I might be wrong and there might be an invasion tomorrow morning, but I don’t think that is likely. Ultimately, the most important thing is making sure that diplomacy continues and finding a realistic timeline for a return to democracy. The other problem is that, as we have seen in Mali and Burkina Faso, and in Chad as well, that the agreed timelines have stalled, and it looks like the juntas do not have any interest in leaving power.

- Q13 Neil Coyle:** How can we continue diplomatic relations if ambassadors are disappearing? What should we make of what is happening with the French ambassador?

Aanu Adeoye: The situation with the French ambassador is very peculiar. The US Deputy Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland, was in Niamey to meet with the junta. Even though she did not meet the leader of the coup himself, she was able to meet his allies. The regime in Niger say that France has refused to engage with them, and that because of that they want them to leave. You have this thing where other countries still have their ambassadors in Niger but the French ambassador is in the embassy. We shouldn’t look at the situation with France; we should look at that as a very peculiar situation. That goes back to my point that each country needs to look at how it engages one-on-one with Niger and not necessarily follow the French path.

- Q14 Chair:** Can I press you on that? The French are saying that they cannot reach their ambassador, essentially suggesting that he has been taken hostage, but Anu, you said that the ambassador is in the embassy. Do we have more clarification, which perhaps broke in the last few hours, while we have been sitting?

Aanu Adeoye: Essentially, the timeline of events that we know is that President Macron said last week that the French ambassador has been held hostage in the premises. What he meant was that he is not allowed out of the embassy, and that is because Niger has issued an arrest warrant for the police to take him out of Niger. That is because they declared him persona non grata, I think two or three weeks ago. Again, this is the stand-off between Niger and France, deciding who is going to blink first. The context is that during this crisis, the American ambassador has started work in Niger.

- Q15 Chair:** For those online who are saying that the French have done this on purpose—not withdrawn their ambassador so that they have an excuse to go in militarily—what would you say is the likely thinking, actually, of those currently in charge of Niger?

Aanu Adeoye: I think that the people running Niger are very sensitive to any talk of a potential military invasion, whether it be from France or from



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ECOWAS. We can see that in why they have entered this alliance with Mali and Burkina Faso. I would be surprised if there were some military intervention from France or ECOWAS, to be honest. Some of it is essentially a stand-off between France and Niger. It does not necessarily reflect what is happening with the other great powers involved in this.

Dr Westcott: To add to that, we have learned elsewhere that you can't impose democracy by force. Even France is aware of that, but as Aneliese said, the escalation of bad relations with France has played entirely into the junta's hands. For them, the only source of legitimacy is to say, "We're protecting you from French imperialism. They want to march back in and put their client in power." In fact, Bazoum was a legitimately elected president. He had a lot of legitimacy, and the junta have very little excuse for throwing him out. Therefore, playing the anti-French card gives them the little bit of legitimacy that they want, and the French have played straight into their hands, sadly.

For the UK, I strongly recommend that we stick as close as we can to ECOWAS, because they have a process in hand. For Nigeria, this is an existential issue. There is a huge, long border. They do not want an unstable or hostile Niger, but they don't want to encourage coups in the region either. They are now very closely engaged; there is a lot of informal diplomacy going on. We should support Nigeria and ECOWAS.

Chair: I will take you back to that in a moment; I know that Royston wants to go more into France.

Q16 **Royston Smith:** In public, we have had conversations about French advantage, French influence and French preferential treatment in francophone countries. Can you give us some specific examples of what that would be? What is it about the hangover from French colonialism that upsets these countries?

Dr Westcott: This policy of *Françafrique*, which is less true now than it was, revolved around three things. First, west African currencies—so francophone currencies—are all tied to the euro, previously the French franc, through the CFA franc.

Secondly, preference is given to French companies. Total is very big there, as well as LVMH and Areva—as it was then; I forget what it is called now—which produces uranium in Niger. That is also a critical interest to France. Their ambassador will go in and say, "You won't get your invitation to the *Élysée* unless you give this contract to a French company"—so rumour says, of course. So they were quite blunt about that.

Thirdly, a lot of these leaders—from Houphouët-Boigny through to Sassou Nguesso from the Republic of the Congo and others—are regularly in Paris, or in Geneva in the case of President Biya from Cameroon. They are seen to be physically close and giving diamonds to Giscard d'Estaing, or whatever.

Those are the three areas where it seemed very close and cosy, and of course, there were physical French bases in a lot of these countries, close



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enough to the presidential palace to protect the Presidents, if necessary. That has gone. Macron has been trying to change this narrative. He took a very forward position on the return of cultural property, for example, and has sent envoys. But the myth is still bigger than the reality, and playing the anti-French card is working very well.

- Q17 **Royston Smith:** Is there something France should be doing? I know we are here to talk about UK policy, and we are essentially, and I will come on to that. Is there something they should be doing to try to prevent of reverse these coups? Should they do something more?

Dr Westcott: The French or the UK?

Royston Smith: The French. I will come on to the UK, but I am thinking about the French.

Dr Westcott: The French need to rethink their Africa policy completely. Their policy was based on keeping France in and the jihadists out. Now France is out and the jihadists are coming in fast. That is a failed policy, so they have to rethink it from scratch—how to re-establish a relationship. They still have good relations with some of the other countries, but there were rumours of coups in the Republic of the Congo only this morning. They were denied by the Government but that is quite vulnerable.

What should France do? They need to come out with a completely different narrative, which is more what the Americans have been doing. The Americans published a very good Africa strategy last year, saying, basically, "Telling Africa what to do—that's all over. We want Africans to tell us what they want and we will then support them to do it, where it is a legitimate Government that we feel comfortable supporting." That has gone down quite well.

The US reputation across Africa is still very mixed, and is still susceptible to and still a target for hostile propaganda from various sources, but, as we see in Niger, they are in a different place. France maybe needs to go back to scratch and think of a completely different policy on Africa.

- Q18 **Royston Smith:** Presumably that would be the same for the UK.

Dr Westcott: We are not in exactly the same place. We are in a different place. Britain has been suffering mainly from a lack of visibility. Two or three years ago, I was going round explicitly asking people all across east Africa and west Africa, "How do you see Britain now?" They said, "We don't really see it much at all. You have faded from view. If we want to get an education, we go to the US. If we want to do business, we go to China. If we want to have fun, we go to Dubai—because we can't get into the UK." That is because of the visa regime that elicits such huge hostility and negative response. It is the single most damaging policy we have in trying to build a good relationship with Africa.

- Q19 **Royston Smith:** There is something of a vacuum, which is being filled by Russia and China. What should the UK do to try to prevent that becoming more acute than it is?



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Dr Westcott: Russia and China offer very different things. Their policies are quite different. The Russian offer is, “We’ll support you if you want us to, no questions asked. We’ll send in Wagner. We’ll prop you up.” You see that in the Central African Republic, in Mali and in Libya with Haftar.

The Chinese offer is very different because they arrived in Africa originally to make money. They invested hugely and built a lot of infrastructure. With that came some political influence, but they were interested in a stable Africa that was prosperous—not that dissimilar from us. When I was dealing with Sudan, we had very fruitful discussions with the Chinese about how we could try to stabilise Sudan. That has changed.

The recent BRICS summit, where President Xi came, signalled quite a shift in Chinese policy. Now what is most important is that you support China internationally. For Britain to compete with that, we also need African friends. We need their support at the UN Security Council and in the UN General Assembly. We have to engage politically and at a high level, to say, “Actually, guys, if you go down this route, you will not get better off in the long run. If you are willing to engage in the global economy, we need to offer more support”—not just bilaterally from the UK but in terms of international institutions providing support to deal with climate change, adaptation, mitigation, all that kind of thing. “We are supporting your agenda here. We support the Barbados mechanism to try to get more representation.” That is where we will start to make as big a difference as increasing our bilateral aid programme.

Q20 **Royston Smith:** Aanu and Aneliese, would like to add anything on those questions that I put to Dr Westcott?

Aanu Adeoye: Looking at the Russia offer, I think there is a tendency to overestimate just how much Russia offers to its partners on the continent. As Dr Westcott said, Russia provides some form of security assistance in the form of the Wagner Group—it does not commit its own troops to any of those operations—in exchange for a fee.

But if you look at things that are actually tangible—for instance, trade and investment—Russia is nowhere to be found. For example, the volume of Russian trade is less than the volume of Turkish or Indian trade on the continent. Russia has actually been able to get a lot of influence with very few resources. Essentially, for the Russians in Africa it is a matter of doing diplomacy on the cheap. It is a bit of a red herring to focus too much on what the Russians are offering, because when it comes down to it, they are not offering much to their partners.

Aneliese Bernard: Just quickly, western diplomacy towards Africa in general is very outdated. Yes, the US came up with somewhat of a new Africa strategy, but it was barely more than rehashing what had already been written for many years, over and over again. Africa has the youngest population. Sixty per cent of Niger’s population is under the age of 25 and it is the fastest-growing population on the face of the planet. If we do not take stock of the fact that Africa is the future and do not redraw our

diplomatic engagement with those countries based on that mentality, we are going to lose this game.

Dr Westcott: Just to underline that point, I was surprised at the G20 that the Prime Minister did not manage to meet the new President of Nigeria, Bola Tinubu, who has met Modi, Macron and Biden, but who has not met the British Prime Minister, even though we have half a million to a million people of Nigerian origin in this country and Nigeria is the linchpin of democracy across west Africa and of potential economic growth. We cannot miss these opportunities.

Chair: Indeed. We did an entire inquiry into Nigeria, due to its importance.

Q21 **Henry Smith:** Aanu, can I come back to you and press you a bit further on Russia? Should the UK be concerned about Russian influence in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger? Have we noticed any change in Russian influence in west Africa and the Sahel more broadly since the killing of Prigozhin?

Aanu Adeoye: I will start with the second part—have we seen any change in Russian influence in the region? Not yet. From our reporting when Prigozhin died, in the week before he died one of the things he was doing was going across his client states, trying to reassure them that he still had Wagner in control of the various security contracts that those countries had with Wagner. With Prigozhin now out of the way, the Russian state has to reassure those countries that things will continue as normal, especially for countries such as Mali, where the security situation has been deteriorating over the past four weeks. We know that Wagner is a little bit in demand in those countries. They have just about 1,000 troops in Mali. To compare that with the height of French deployment—

Chair: Sorry, did you say 1,200 troops?

Aanu Adeoye: About 1,000. At the height of the French deployment, it was about 5,000. Mali is a vast country and there are all of these security challenges, so there is a concern there that Wagner is underpowered in fighting insurgents in Mali. They are not present in Burkina. There has been a lot of talk about them potentially going in, but we have not seen any evidence of them being potentially in Burkina Faso.

So like I said in my earlier answer about Russian influence, we shouldn't overestimate just what the Russians are capable of in this part of the world. They are present in small numbers in Mali, the Central African Republic and eastern Libya with Haftar's men, but not a whole lot elsewhere. That answers the part about Russian influence in the region.

Should the UK be concerned? I think the way to look at this is that, in a time of multi-plurality, these countries are free to decide who they want to partner with. The question that we have to ask ourselves is, "Do we think that these are the right partnerships?" In a lot of ways, they are probably not, but they have to decide whether that is what they want to do.



I think that the main use of Russia for these countries is to act as a counterpoint to French influence. As I think Aneliese or Dr Westcott said, it is really important for many of these regimes that came via coups to show that they are decidedly anti-French, and when you kick the French out, you need some sort of “replacement”. That is what they have found in Russia, essentially, as this partner that walks with them. Yes, perhaps the UK should be concerned, but we should also leave some room for these countries to exercise their sovereignty and decide whether this is the path that they want to follow.

Aneliese Bernard: Can I jump in there? I would be really cautious of disinformation, and social media particularly. Everyone has WhatsApp in west Africa, and that stuff is trending very quickly. Meta recorded last year more pro-Wagner disinformation in Côte d’Ivoire than anywhere in the world outside of Ukraine, and then yesterday, a troll farm was dismantled and arrested in Ghana. That was not too far from where Russia has a huge warehouse where it keeps a lot of—I am not really sure, but there were ties to Russia, essentially. Those are the bigger concerns, in my opinion, right now.

I think that if Russia was going to try to figure out where its linchpin was in west Africa, it would not necessarily be the Sahel. The Sahel is kind of easy pickings at this point, to just swagger the idea that they might provide some kind of security assistance through Wagner. The coastal countries, in my opinion, are where there should be more watching of what is going on and what is being said, particularly on social media channels.

Dr Westcott: Aneliese is quite right. The Wagner forces in Mali and CAR are not there to defeat the terrorists; they are there to keep the regimes in power. Therefore, at the UN, these countries will vote with Russia, and that matters to them. Also, for Wagner, this is a commercial business; in return for keeping the troops there, it gets access to gold, diamonds and whatever—it is self-funding. So Russia is certainly very keen to keep its position there.

However, what is worrying is that there is a very fertile soil for this propaganda misinformation. We saw Macky Sall change his position on Ukraine because he was worried about the opinion in the street, which was quite pro-Russian because it is “anti-imperialist”. We have to be a lot smarter about how we help democratic Governments counter that—again, by not allowing ourselves to be painted as neo-colonialist.

Chair: I would point you to our Wagner network report, which we released a few months ago called “Guns for gold”, because it takes exactly—

Dr Westcott: I must have read it.

Q22 **Chair:** Clearly, yes. Aneliese, can I just take you back for a moment? The UK only recently reopened its embassy in Niger; I am not quite sure when, but I think it was in late summer. How badly, then, had we miscalculated the political stability in Niger? Is there a failure of western



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intelligence and analysis within west Africa and the Sahel, given that this is a continued pattern? Maybe it is just lack of western media interest, but for the last nine months there has not been an ongoing dialogue to say that we should be alert and concerned.

Aneliese Bernard: It is a complicated question. Niger obviously has a history of coups. For example, I was there from 2017 to 2019 and there were three reports of potential coups. A lot of the time what ended up happening—certainly what became common within the diplomatic community—was people saying, “Oh, it’s not that big a deal. Don’t worry about it. It’s just Nigeriens doing what they do, which is flexing.”

I think that there are two things to be said. One—this is a little sad, but it is a reality check—is that when this coup happened, the US embassy and, I believe, the French embassy were in the transition period of everyone coming in and others leaving. There were a lot of lost relationships and information between the new diplomats coming in and the old ones leaving. Any time there is a transition, there is always going to be some kind of lost opportunity.

The other thing—this is something that I always found quite strange when I lived there—is that there was a sense that even if there was a coup, we would always be within the favour of the party that was ruling, because Nigeriens are prone to couping and it is just silliness. There is a lack of respect for the severity of how complicated the political situation is in Niger.

Arguably, you could have predicted this. PNDS-Tarayya, which was the merger of the party of Issoufou, the former President, and Bazoum’s party, was really a kind of blood pact that had been fomented years before, based on the two political parties being hardcore oppositions that were rivals and, essentially, splitting up the Parliament. When they came together, it was originally a loose coalition and it was contingent on Bazoum becoming Minister of Interior and ostensibly one of the most powerful people in Niger by anchoring all the foreign aid and being the one person who would represent it, on behalf of the Government, to all the western partners.

There is also a blind spot there, because we talked only to Bazoum for the most part. The whole time I was there, most of our programming, from development through security to diplomatic, went through the Ministry of Interior and was not really fed out among the other political parties, so there was a blind spot there. This is for the US, which is where there is a huge blind spot. General Tchiani, the person who carried out the coup, was part of the presidential guard. We had sanctioned the presidential guard for over 10 years at that point for being the ones who carried out the coup back in 2011. As a result, we had zero relationships within that security organisation. The French had some, but the French tend to operate in the same way the US does, which is by hearing intelligence coming from their partners and believing that it is accurate and coming only to them. I think there is a lot of hubris at play, and that was why we missed the long end of this.



Q23 Chair: Just to pick up on that final point, the atmospherics I am picking up are that the French were not willing to bring along allies with them when it came to Niger and to Mali; they were not willing to ask for help. Given what you have just said about the French not sharing intelligence on a basic level, let alone something more high-level, is that something that would be in line with what you have been hearing?

Aneliese Bernard: I cannot speak on behalf of the intelligence community, but I do think that there is a huge disadvantage in the fact that Five Eyes does not include France. As I say, I do not speak on behalf of the IC, but in places—in francophone Africa and other parts of the world where the French have been dominant—that means that we are just always going to be absent of certain information and we have to piece it together.

Q24 Chair: That is very helpful. Turning back to ECOWAS, I am interested to look at what we think its response has been to recent coups. Obviously I understand that a number of years ago, ECOWAS countries signed an agreement with one another. They essentially agreed that if there were a coup they would militarily intervene in those countries; that is a slight oversimplification, but that was the generic gist that was taken from it. How effective have they been? What do we see as their response so far? I will get into some of the more specific criticisms, but what is the likelihood that they could muster some sort of response?

Dr Westcott: They could. When I was in the region, ECOWAS had a very fine PowerPoint presentation on how they would put together a regional force, but I don't believe there was anything actually behind the PowerPoint. ECOWAS did have a tradition of being effective in action against unconstitutional changes of Government, and did intervene directly and successfully in both Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia. When President Jammeh tried to ignore the results of an election, ECOWAS and specifically Nigeria were able to mobilise troops and send them in. They were small countries, and at that stage there was a clear majority of democrats among the west African states that make up ECOWAS, so it was not too risky to do that.

Since then, two things have happened. First, Nigeria has become completely diverted by its own internal security problems and is stretched very thin. It is dealing not only with Boko Haram but with wider banditry, instability and potential insurrections in the south-east, so it does not have the capacity.

Secondly, there has been a gradual erosion of the democratic consensus within ECOWAS, which makes it more difficult for it to put things together. As each unconstitutional change or coup has happened—in Guinea and successively in Mali and Burkina Faso—ECOWAS has tried to hold the line to force the coup leaders into agreement with a transition back to civilian rule.

As the whole process of coups has accelerated, however—to come back to the point that you first made—there is now some solidarity among the



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juntas, who are saying, "No one is going to tell us whether we should hand back to civilians." We are therefore looking at a rather longer period until the populations in those countries get too fed up with the military Government not delivering anything and take to the street, trying to force a change of Government back to something more democratic. ECOWAS has therefore lost a lot of the solidarity and capability it had 10 years ago or so.

- Q25 **Chair:** On that solidarity point, when we speak to Nigerians they are confident that ECOWAS is very effective and has a strong role. How can the UK support Nigeria in that leadership role? Also, why is the narrative coming out that ECOWAS is somehow beholden to Addis Ababa—to the AU, essentially? A lot of undermining of ECOWAS seems to be taking place in the conversations that I hear.

Dr Westcott: There is a constant tension between regional organisations and the African Union. At one point, they agreed a principle of subsidiarity, so that in any regional crisis the regional organisation takes the lead in sorting it out; if it cannot, they go to the AU. The AU, however, also has an interest in trying to maintain a firm line against unconstitutional changes of Government, but it does not have any military forces at its disposal either, so it can only operate through political pressure. If the regional organisations are ineffective—let's face it, IGAD, the horn of Africa organisation, has been unable to do anything about the civil conflicts in Ethiopia or Sudan—there is only the AU to step in.

You would hope that discussions between the Presidents in ECOWAS and the AU would agree a common position. The AU political and security committee has come out with some fairly firm positions on the coups in Niger, but less so on Gabon, because it is hard to pretend that the ruler was strongly legitimate. It is a constant tension in African politics. A great deal of lip service is paid to African unity and solidarity, and to African solutions to African problems, but delivering that is challenging.

- Q26 **Chair:** Aanu, you are in Lagos. In terms of Nigerian leadership of ECOWAS, should we be offering support? What would that look like? What do you think of these narratives about Addis versus Lagos?

Aanu Adeoye: That is a very interesting question. Dr Westcott said that Nigeria took a back seat over the past decade or so in its leadership role of ECOWAS; I think that one of the things that the new President has attempted to do is to show some muscular Nigerian foreign policy and try to become the leader in the region.

I think that it is best to support Nigeria as it seeks a solution to the crisis in Niger. Perhaps there was a mis-step on ECOWAS's part when it said it was going to invade Niger; that bought the junta in Niger a lot of legitimacy, because people who were opposed to the coup started to rally in support of the new Government when there was that threat of a potential military intervention. I think ECOWAS mis-stepped on that front. Perhaps the issue was that it had tried successfully to enforce transitions of power in Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia, but those are small countries



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with populations of 2 million or 2.5 million. Niger is an entirely different ball game.

We keep saying that there are all these back channels, negotiations and diplomacy continuing to go on. When ECOWAS said that they were potentially going to invade Niger, there was a lot of internal opposition to that in Nigeria. Nigeria shares a very long border with Niger. People from those communities—elites and people in Parliament from those regions—were steadfastly opposed to any form of military intervention. I think it is reasonable to think that there may be a walk-back in terms of any potential military intervention. We also know that the AU was not particularly slow on military intervention, which is why there is a continuation of diplomacy and dialogue.

Algeria has perhaps been able to find a solution. We do not know how seriously it is being taken, but the Algerians have suggested perhaps a nine-month transition to democracy. Algeria shares a border with Niger and is also against any military intervention. We will see whether the nine-month transition is accepted by ECOWAS and the other players. I think we are due some type of decision or dialogue on how best to handle a political transition.

Q27 Neil Coyle: The military junta has apparently confirmed that the President of Niger faces trial for treason, which would potentially open him up to the death penalty. What should the UK's response be if such a policy were to be pursued? Who wants to go first?

Dr Westcott: None of us, particularly—but yes, they have. Again, I think that is part of the posturing. They are trying to claim legitimacy, and are therefore accusing their predecessor of having been treasonous. I think it will be part of the negotiation process between Nigeria/ECOWAS and the junta that such charges should be withdrawn. Whether that means that Bazoum goes into exile or that he stays in the country playing a different role remains to be seen. I would see it as a bargaining counter, but should they feel they were pushed against the wall, they might well pursue this—again, in the interests of trying to build their own legitimacy by claiming that the previous Government were illegitimate. You can always find or invent some evidence to support that.

Neil Coyle: In every country, perhaps.

Dr Westcott: I think the message from the UK should be very clear that that would further push them beyond the pale. That is why it is quite good to have an ambassador there who can send that message quietly, behind the doors.

Aanu Adeoye: I agree with Dr Westcott that this is a bargaining chip for the new rulers of Niger. When ECOWAS threatened to invade, one of the first threats that they made was that they were going to perhaps kill President Bazoum, who is still in their custody. We should see this in the light of a Government that want to use this very important man as a negotiating tool with ECOWAS. I would not be surprised if one of the



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results of this negotiation was that the regime had to free President Bazoum in exchange for them perhaps staying longer in power.

Yes, it is a negotiating tactic, but obviously everyone has to take a very firm line if for some reason they decide to proceed with a trial. But I do not see that happening, essentially.

Q28 Liam Byrne: May I circle back to the underlying causes of the coups that we have seen? First, we now have confirmation that the annual meetings of the IMF and World Bank will go ahead in Africa—in Morocco—on 8 October. One of the big debates will be about the relationship between climate change, poverty and the escalation of violence.

Can I get your perspective? How do you think the drought of the last five or six years has contributed to the levels of poverty that we now see? How is that poverty contributing to violence?

Dr Westcott: I mentioned—before you joined us, I think—that one of the three underlying causes of this spate of coups is climate change and demographic growth, because they are putting increasing pressure on still-limited resources. We have been unable to generate the kind of accelerated growth that is necessary in these countries.

The Sahel is very much on the frontline of climate change. We see that on both sides of the Sahara, as we now see from what has happened in Libya. That merely increases the demands on these rather weak and under-resourced Governments to deliver jobs and opportunities to their citizens, while making it more difficult for people to find a living. Those who cannot find a legitimate living where they are will move somewhere where they can find a living—or they will take up a Kalashnikov and go and take what they can get, because somebody offers it to them.

Liam Byrne: So it is a factor.

Dr Westcott: It is absolutely a factor. We need to be very conscious of that in trying to accelerate our efforts to help these Governments in the region, particularly the coastal Governments that are still relatively stable and relatively democratic, to cope with the pressures that are being built up by climate change and demographic growth.

Liam Byrne: Do you have any other quick comments on that, Aneliese or Aanu?

Aneliese Bernard: Just to concur, and to reinforce that migration really increased in the past decade—because of climate change, for the most part. It is not just in the Sahara desert either; we are not just talking about the three Sahel countries and parts of their neighbouring countries. Migration from coastal states has rapidly increased over the past decade because of salination from water levels rising, formerly arable land now not being arable, people having to move, and fisheries being depleted. If migration is of concern to Europe, obviously west Africa's climate situation should be of concern to Europe.



Aanu Adeoye: I agree. Senegal, for example, is one of the most stable countries in west Africa—in all of Africa, actually—but there has been a concerted emigration of particularly young men seeking a better life because of climate change, which has affected fishing and agriculture, two of the biggest sources of employment for a lot of young men.

On what Dr Westcott said about people who are unemployed, I remember having a conversation with people who said that a lot of young men who belong to insurgent groups are not particularly driven by ideology; it is because they do not have work to do. Someone memorably told me that if you give an unemployed person \$50 a week, a Kalashnikov and a motorcycle, that sounds like a great deal to someone who has nothing to do. All these things are interconnected. The coups, climate change, insecurity and unemployment are all different sides of the same coin.

- Q29 **Liam Byrne:** Given that vortex, in which other countries in the region should we be concerned about coups in the future? For example, they have just secured peace in Ethiopia. It is not too far away, but it was not an unviolent place in the past. Where else across the region should we worry that there may be the risk of a coup? Crucially, what does the UK do to act to prevent and prepare?

Dr Westcott: You are quite right that this band of instability stretches through Sudan to Ethiopia, and the pressures are very much the same. There are different political circumstances in each of those that have led to civil conflict, but the pressures on Governments to meet expectations, and the willingness of people to take more extreme steps if they feel more desperate, are clear across all of them. At the moment, that has not spread south from that band to the coastal states in west Africa and places like Kenya and Uganda. There is a high risk of coups in some of the other central African countries, which have fairly authoritarian hereditary Governments or, indeed, Presidents who have not yet handed on to their children but might some time soon. In those where there are Governments with little legitimacy—

- Q30 **Liam Byrne:** Can I tempt you to name a couple?

Dr Westcott: Well, we heard rumours of coups in the Republic of Congo—Congo-Brazzaville—earlier today. It was known that President Biya very swiftly reshuffled his senior military leaders to send some of them out of the country and into other jobs, after the coup in Gabon—the next day, in fact. That suggests he might be feeling a little vulnerable. Equatorial Guinea has been a personal fiefdom of the President for many years.

- Q31 **Liam Byrne:** What are the implications for the UK operation?

Dr Westcott: The implication for the UK is that we need to work as hard as we can to support countries such as Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and The Gambia, to avoid that contagion, and help them meet the demands of their citizens. Pace what you were saying about Sierra Leone, these are relatively legitimate, peaceful, civilian Governments. The same in Kenya, though Uganda we might have another chat about sometime.



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Liam Byrne: Aneliese, can I put that question to you?

Aneliese Bernard: It is not just a coup that I would watch for. Political instability in general is something that is coming down the pipeline for all the coastal and west African states right now. I have been doing quite a bit of field research for the past four years, specifically in Benin, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, on what they are feeling and seeing as the jihadist expansion continues to expand further south.

Those countries, including Nigeria of course, suffer from that north-south divide. What is going on in the north of these countries is very much tied to the Sahel, and not just in terms of families, language, market activity and religion. It is also tied to the relationships with armed groups and the explosion of communal militias in response to the jihadists and other types of cartel group, as well as dissatisfaction with politics in their south. That is something that needs to be very closely watched right now.

Ghana suffers from really fractured political vigilante groups that have exploded across the country in recent years. The north is only becoming increasingly unstable, particularly as JNIM moves further south on to its border. That could raise some alarm bells in Ghana right now that something could take place in the north that might not be a coup, but could look more like an insurgency that might stir other political discontent further south in the country.

Q32 **Liam Byrne:** Aanu, we have elections coming up in Liberia, Mali and Senegal. Would those countries be on your worry list? Are there any others that we should add?

Aanu Adeoye: Senegal in particular, I would not worry about a coup but, as Aneliese said, I would worry about some form of political instability. We have seen that over the past two years in Senegal. There was talk that maybe President Macky Sall was going to run for a third term. Ultimately, he decided not to run for a third term, but there is a situation with the opposition leader whose party has been disbanded. There have been protests in support of the opposition leader. There could be some concerns if he is not allowed to run in next year's election; we could see some protest turning violent. That is a country to watch.

Ivory Coast do not have an election, but in the neighbourhood they are in being pro-France has become essentially a death knell for some Governments. If you are sitting in Ivory Coast, that is a country of concern, just because they are seen as pro-French. We have seen opposition leaders who are trying to take advantage, trying to position themselves as the ones to break the yoke of French imperialism. That makes it fertile, if not for a coup, but for serious discontent.

Chair: Do you want to go on to jihadism, or are you happy?

Liam Byrne: I am happy.

Q33 **Chair:** I want to ask about what France does next. We have asked about what we should be doing, but does France essentially need to back off



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and recognise that, at the moment, their brand is so tarnished? Does France need to bring together a coalition of countries where it is not the leading light, but provides the supportive intelligence and capability it clearly has on the ground? What should we be supporting France to do? Aneliese, do you want to kick us off, and then I will go to Nick?

Aneliese Bernard: I actually like your second option there. France's approach to west Africa has not been received well, and we have officially learned that after the third go—well, fourth I guess—for the Sahel countries. France has a really unique opportunity right now to guide from behind. The US has done that many times; the UK is clearly still doing that in many contexts. France needs to step back and promote a more co-ordinated relationship with other partners that still have the active relationships there and back channels. It is possible, so it is unclear why they are being so reticent to allow the US to essentially be in the ascendent in a country like Niger and to take the lead in that relationship. It is a little bizarre, frankly. France would benefit from co-operating a little bit more.

One last comment: it is not just at the capital level. This is probably advice for all diplomats. In Niamey, when I lived there, there was very little co-ordination between the US embassy and the French embassy, and I found that striking, especially since they share a wall. That speaks to the lack of cohesion, particularly on what our objectives were in terms of diplomacy.

Dr Westcott: Yes, when I discussed with the Americans their approach to west Africa, they said, "Oh, we leave that to the French." I think they now realise that they cannot leave it to the French, and they have indeed stepped up. You are quite right that France needs to rebrand completely its engagement with Africa, which will be quite hard for it to do. France puts those states that are still friendly to it at great risk if it does not do that.

As has been said, one of the biggest political vulnerabilities of President Ouattara in Côte d'Ivoire is that he is seen to be close to the French. The election is coming up there, and undoubtedly the opposition will use anti-French sentiment, because it is being spread widely via misinformation that is hard to counter. It gets into the bloodstream of the African street. The only way to counter that is to say publicly at a high level, "We are going to change."

I do not think the UK needs to do that. In some ways, the UK needs to do the opposite, which is to step up a bit, but on the new basis of, "We are here to support the African agenda" in ECOWAS, the AU, or whatever. The UK needs to be seen to be supportive in a way that, in practice, China and Russia are not.

Q34 **Henry Smith:** Islamic insurgency is often cited as a reason for military juntas to intervene. Do you think the UK is doing enough to counter Islamic insurgency in the Sahel? Who wants to go first?

Aanu Adeoye: I will. That is a really tough question—whether the UK, or anyone else, is doing enough to tackle insurgencies. As I said at the



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beginning of this session, there is a tendency to think that we can solve all of these problems militarily. As we found out, we really cannot. The UN mission in Mali, which is currently closing down, was present for a decade. French troops with Operation Barkhane were there for more than a decade as well. With all the will in the world, the problem still persists, indicating that this problem is multifaceted and that we cannot solve all of it militarily. There have to be some solutions that people will find distasteful.

President Bazoum in Niger engaged with some of the terrorists. Some of them were granted amnesty in exchange for laying down their weapons. That was not particularly popular among people in the military, but if you look at the data, Niger remains the most stable country in that neighbourhood. That is not because they have the strongest military; it is because they reached deals that people found uncomfortable.

Ultimately, everyone could do better with fighting insurgencies, but we need to realise that some of this is because there is an absence of opportunity for people. Not all of the people joining these groups are motivated by ideology. They are joining because, frankly, it is the best job they can find. We need to recognise that. It is why the coups are not conducive to all this. What you need in these countries is the presence of a strong state with economic opportunities, which the military regimes are probably not best placed to provide, but they say that they can provide it in the short term and then they gain some legitimacy. Ultimately, there needs to be a multi-faceted approach to what is, quite frankly, very difficult.

Dr Westcott: The UK has pursued a two-handed strategy. It came in to provide physical support to French and EU efforts earlier on, by providing helicopters and people for the EU training mission and to work alongside Barkhane. At the same time, there was a much quieter connection with the Nigerian military, as with the Kenyan security services, in order to provide a much lower-key but more effective intelligence-led operation against terrorist groups. It has had mixed results—quite good results in Kenya, but in Nigeria it was a bit more difficult, because the co-operation was a bit less open. There is no harm in continuing the second kind of those, but obviously the first one has now fallen by the wayside. I do not see any benefit to the UK from becoming militarily involved in the Sahel at this stage.

Aneliese Bernard: Military engagement in the Sahel right now is obviously quite complicated because of the ability to trust any of these military juntas with security assistance. However, there are other ways that are incredibly more successful. I am thankful to Aanu for bringing up the repentis programme—that is what it is called locally—which is the defection and reintegration efforts of ex-combatants from jihadist groups. When I was in Niger, my job was helping to stand that programme up. We worked with the Government, across all the Ministries, to help them build a legal framework to legally allow people to voluntarily surrender and provide intelligence and operational information to the Nigerien Government and military in return for exemption from prosecution.



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The programme started in the Chad Basin region. It was supposed to operate in lockstep with Operation Safe Corridor, despite some of the controversy around OSC, but when it was expanded to the Tillabéri region, the idea behind it was to foment a process by which not only could these combatants come home, but they could also build up a pipeline for intelligence so that the Government of Niger could actually do a counter-insurgency. It was civilian-led for that reason.

From my understanding, the British Government have quite a bit of experience doing civil-military activity in east Africa. I am not an east Africa expert, so I cannot really speak to that, but that is certainly where there is a huge need for help right now. Counter-insurgency in civil-military work is something that the US Government are only trying to figure out at this juncture, but it does require a population-centric counter-insurgency approach. That is what was working in west Africa and continues to work today. It is the idea that the military works by and through the local population to really get a sense of who the insurgents are, what their demands are and how they are operating and recruiting, and then doubling back to actually counter their approach.

We are seeing this get set up right now in Benin, and it is also taking place in Côte d'Ivoire. It is starting to provide successful examples of repelling the influence and activities of jihadists, which is forcing jihadists then to carry out more recalcitrant and in some cases violent activities instead. But it is also giving proof to the point that, if they do not have a positive reception at the local level, they are going to have to use force, and then the military can step in and deal with that. If the UK has that experience, it is not really a financial lift, and it is something that the UK should definitely offer in these contexts.

Q35 Liam Byrne: Do you think that, in an effort to combat jihadi insurgency, perhaps the UK Government need to trade some of their principles for pragmatism in terms of engaging with those military dictatorships?

Aneliese Bernard: Yes, absolutely. You have to work through those Governments to do a proper counter-insurgency campaign; you cannot do it on the sidelines, or you risk creating a parallel governance structure. That is the thing that I have been promoting quite a bit to other partners. It does not require a full-blown security apparatus or significant security assistance; it requires more intelligence and pragmatic hand-holding to be able to manufacture something that is complicated and obviously has a lot of controversy associated with it. When it really risks a massive security instrument for a military junta we are not necessarily allies with that—that is my point.

Henry Smith: Aanu, do you have any thoughts on that?

Aanu Adeoye: Ultimately, there will be some type of partnership to figure out how to deal with the problem. The UK Government would have to engage with the Government of the day, because those are the ones in charge. The example to look at right now is Burkina Faso. Earlier this year it kicked out French forces, but it maintained dialogue with other powers,



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including France. There is a way to continue some form of dialogue with such Governments even though the UK or another power might not necessarily agree with how they came to power.

- Q36 **Chair:** I have a final question. As you answer, I will be grateful if you add in any reflections on issues you wish we had raised or asked about, so you can put points on the record that we might not have thought of asking.

How different does life feel? I reckon that every coup and every situation has been different, but for the average person in Burkina Faso, Mali or Niger, how does life feel different under the current juntas from how it was before? Is there a risk of further disillusionment, because things might not change as much as people thought they might? They have been out on the streets raising Russian flags and burning French ones, celebrating, and saying, "Our resources are coming back to us. Corruption will end. We have an opportunity," but is there a risk that not much meaningful change will be achieved? I recognise that we are early in the processes, but I am interested in your reflections on the atmospherics and, as I said, on anything wider. Aanu, do you want to kick us off?

Aanu Adeoye: I think we should look at these countries on a case-by-case basis. In Mali, the junta came to power with a lot of popular support. It first came to power in 2020, on the back of massive street protests against the president, and people were generally supportive. Over the past month or so, however, the security situation has deteriorated in Mali, especially in the north and in the centre of the country, so much so that we are seeing people starting to question how much the regime has changed their lives. Last week, someone nicknamed "Ben the Brain" was sentenced to two years in prison for "discrediting the state". All he had said on social media was, "This is not working." That was someone who had been a vocal supporter of the regime, but he has been put in prison because he strayed once.

In Niger, we have seen support and people on the streets, but the thing that has mostly affected people in Niger has been the sanctions that ECOWAS put on Niger. Niger is a landlocked country that depends on its neighbours for the supply of food, aid and medicines. Relief organisations have warned about people potentially starving, and that is happening in a country that was already not in the best of shape in terms of the economy before the coup. People have been struggling massively, financially, as a result of the sanctions put in place by ECOWAS. The regime have said they want sanctions relief, but I don't see ECOWAS lifting any of those sanctions if they don't get any concessions from the regime. It is now essentially a stand-off in relation to what the regime can offer ECOWAS to lessen some of the sanctions on them.

There is always the initial excitement and euphoria from getting rid of the Government. We saw that in Gabon, where people were really excited to see the Bongo family deposed after 56 years in power. We have to find out how people are feeling a few months or a year down the line. Personally, I



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think it is very difficult to see how a military Government have legitimacy or the good will ultimately to improve people's lives.

Aneliese Bernard: I concur with everything that Aanu said, but want to add that not everybody wanted this coup. This coup was clearly carried out by security elites in Niamey and violated the political determination of the people outside the capital. The capital city, Niamey, has always had a population that is very contrarian towards whoever is in power, so I would hesitate a lot before saying that this has significant, widespread popular support. Niamey does not represent the rest of the country.

The other piece of this is where you do see sectarian divides, particularly in the Sahel. The Tuaregs in northern Niger have so far condemned the role of the CMA in Mali, particularly their collaboration with JNIM, the jihadist group there. However, that is not to say that we might not see some of the Tuaregs, particularly those who have been disenfranchised by the coup—a lot of them had been in positions of power to settle grievances they had from previous civil wars—emerge as yet another party to some conflict that takes place and erupts across the region. So I think the sectarian issue is one to keep tabs on and certainly one that will, over time, start to show more evidence of where there is dissatisfaction with the ruling parties.

Chair: Dr Westcott, to wrap us up?

Dr Westcott: Quite a lot of people across the whole of west Africa are used to a degree of political turbulence, some of which affects their lives and some of which does not. Changes of Government in the capital do not necessarily make any difference, but what is impacting on people in these countries now is the deterioration in security. It is not safe to go around. That actually applies in Nigeria, too. It is not safe to drive around from one city to another. Also, there are rising prices and shortages.

What that is leading to is a reversion to a politics of survival, both for the regimes, who will do whatever is necessary to stay in power because it gives them access to resources, and for people. But for people, rather than taking to the streets and trying to restore a democratic Government, survival often means, "I'm going somewhere else." The first place they go is the neighbouring countries, because very few of them have the \$5,000 or \$10,000 necessary to get all the way to Europe. That risks destabilising the neighbouring countries, which are under their own pressures. The economic situation is not easy for the west African coastal Governments—Nigeria and Ghana—either.

For the UK, there are three broad lessons. One is that they should sustain critical engagement with all the countries. Secondly, you need to invest, particularly in the big countries that are critical to regional stability—above all, Nigeria, because that is the linchpin for west Africa and for the UK. Thirdly, do not neglect the small countries, because they can quite easily fall over, but they can quite easily be kept standing up with relatively small investment from the UK—political, as well as financial and economic.



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Chair: Thank you all ever so much. That was really insightful, and it was really helpful to have that discussion. With that, we will close the session.