**Uranium Fuels international conflict in Niger**

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**Introduction:**

Military coups have become a main feature of some African countries; Niger is the third country in the Sahel region to witness a coup since 2020 after Mali and Burkina Faso, which has recently made Niger face an international conflict over uranium, which became evident after the military coup led by the commander of the presidential guard "Abdul Rahman Tiani" on July 26, 2023; Due to its fame for its richness in one of the precious strategic minerals, which is uranium, it is also the main supplier to the European Union countries, as it ranks second as a supplier of uranium to the Union countries, reaching the equivalent of about 25.4%, and it also plays a role in imports to France, which reached about 35% of French needs, and the production of about 70% of electricity, and accordingly, the military coup against President "Mohamed Bazoum" had a direct negative impact on France, especially after expanding its nuclear stations and its demand for uranium, which will be higher than it was in the past years to operate its nuclear reactors, which have reached 65 65 interactors.

In light of the importance of uranium, which contributed to placing Niger at the center of global attention, especially in 2003 after the spread of intelligence information about the attempt of the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's regime to buy about 500 tons of uranium from it, and after the recent military coup; the country will face an international conflict, most notably France, especially after the cancellation of the licenses of the French company "Urano" to produce nuclear fuel in one of the largest uranium mines in the world known as "Imoraine" located in the north of the country, as well as the European Union, in addition to competing regional countries such as Algeria and the ECOWAS economic group, which includes more than 15 African countries, in addition to attempts to sequentially play the role of China, Turkey and Iran.

And So, this paper seeks to identify the strategic importance of Niger despite its classification as one of the poorest countries in the world according to the International Monetary Fund data, then to show the form of the international conflict in it due to uranium, whether in the form of sanctions or consequences, and finally to identify the possible scenarios during the coming period, to conclude the paper with the conclusion to learn about the most important results we have reached.

**Axis I: The Geopolitical Importance of Niger**

Although population of Niger suffers from extreme poverty; It is considered the seventh poorest country in the world according to the International Monetary Fund’s data estimate for the year 2023 according to the average per capita GDP criterion, and this is due to a group of reasons, including the following:

**Political reasons:** The dependence of some Nigerien governments on uranium as a strategic commodity, which is under the control of French companies, in addition to its political instability contributed to its economic instability and thus the rise in poverty rates, in addition to the rise in external debt and the increase in dependence on foreign aid, which constituted a direct and indirect factor in the failure of economic development processes. (1)

**Economic reasons**: Despite the diversity of the elements of the country’s economic strength, it is affected by a group of elements, including natural factors such as: **climate change** represented by sandstorms that increase desertification, which negatively affects the suitability of agricultural lands, and **an imbalance in the water balance** due to mismanagement of water resources, as well as the variation in rainfall rates, which negatively affects groundwater as a source of drinking water. (2)

Notwithstanding the above, the importance of Niger lies in its richness in one of the strategic minerals, which is uranium. It has the largest uranium reserves in Africa, making it rank seventh in uranium production globally. It also has the equivalent of about (5%) of the total uranium reserves according to data from the International Nuclear Association; which made it the second supplier to France at a rate of about (20%) of Paris's total imports of uranium, which nuclear power plants depend on, within the framework of Europe's efforts to search for an alternative gas to the Russian supplier, through gas supply projects, one of which passes through Morocco and the other through Algeria, and both pass through Niger. At the same time, other international powers (China and Russia) sought to find an old place in the region rich in uranium suppliers. (3) In addition to Niger's inability to exploit all of its uranium reserves to push its economy and people forward as a result of the French presence.

**Axis II: Uranium in Niger... Sanctions and Consequences**

The owner of the military coup that overthrew President "Mohamed Bazoum" on July 26, 2023, and the installation of the leader of the military coup, General "Abdel Rahman Cheyani", as head of the military council in the country, Different reactions to the uranium that Niger is rich in, which made it the focus of attention of countries around the world to obtain the advantages that uranium enjoys, which are represented in the increase in the rate of nuclear energy production from 24% to 100% by 2050, in addition to the increase in its price due to the new American ban on importing uranium from Russia, which led to a decrease in its supply despite the world's need for about 100 thousand tons annually by 2040, in addition to the increased dependence of countries around the world on nuclear energy for countries around the world; which contributed to the emergence of the importance of uranium on the basis that it is the primary fuel for nuclear reactors, which is considered one of the means of producing low-carbon electricity, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, and in return, some countries sought to sign agreements between them and Niger to benefit from this precious metal in the future, as we will see in detail.

**First: Imposed sanctions**

The military coup in Niger has brought direct and indirect political and economic sanctions to most countries of the world, especially France and the European Union, as we will see:

**Paris and the EU:** A series of punitive decisions were announced at a meeting of the National Defense and Security Council, chaired by Macron, according to a statement by the French Foreign Ministry, with the aim of “undermining democracy,” which included halting all measures related to development aid provided to Niger, as well as halting budget support for the West African country, in addition to emphasizing the legitimacy of the elected president. (4) This came after the decision of the Niger military leadership to halt gold and uranium exports to France. This came as a result of Niger’s announcement to halt uranium exports, on which France relies heavily to meet its nuclear energy needs, which negatively affects Paris. The French nuclear fuel company Orano also announced that it had lost control of the uranium mine known as “Somaire” in Niger after the board of directors’ decisions were stopped from being implemented, and its authorities' assumed supervision of the mine, in addition to its support for the return of “Bazoum.” Neighboring countries, most notably Algeria, also allowed the use of French territory, despite not taking that step during the coup against Mali and Burkina Faso.

**USA:** Although it did not declare a halt to aid, the Acting Deputy Secretary of State held intense talks with senior military junta officials, addressing issues of economic and other assistance that could be at risk if the “democratic system is not restored.” This can be interpreted as the mere declaration by the United States that what happened in Niger was a military coup, which means the cessation of American aid, and thus the cessation of its support for its assistance against terrorist operations, which has amounted to about $500 million since 2012 to date. Taking into account that despite the calm in relations between America and Niger as a result of the coup against President Bazoum; However, there is a challenge that has been threatening the calm of the relationship, which is the uranium deal concluded between Iran and Niger in February 2024, which emerged during the visit of an American delegation headed by the US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Molly Phee, to Niger in March, under which Iran is helping to access uranium reserves in Niger, taking into account the size of the challenges facing Niger from concluding such an agreement; as it negatively affects Niger's foreign file amidst the circulation of news about that agreement through the American media.

**Italy:** Following the example of France and the European Union, it has taken the initiative to stop long-term international aid to Niger, estimated at about (2.5) billion dollars between 2022 and 2026. While continuing to provide critical aid. (5) This is due not only to the lack of benefit from its precious metals, but there are statements that the coup will disrupt the implementation of the Mattei Plan (a new model for Italian partnership with Africa within the framework of a set of clear factors resulting from an integrated strategy with Africa to serve Europe's geopolitical interests and position Italy as a front for new European influence in Africa; the most important of which is taking advantage of its geographical proximity to the African continent and the ease of trade routes and energy transfer..) on the basis that the coup contributes to Niger's rapprochement with Russia and not Western countries.

**Russia:** Although Russia described the military intervention as a violation of the constitution, some claimed that it was involved in the coup on the one hand, and that the United States stood by it and warned of the possibility of Russia exploiting the crisis on the other hand, according to official statements from the White House published immediately after the coup, and confirmed repeatedly by officials. (6)

**ECOWAS**: The Economic Community of West African States, known as ECOWAS, announced its readiness to intervene militarily to end the coup in Niger, days after suspending trade and closing airspace with Niger. Accordingly, the military council accused it of allying with Western countries to attack their country. (7)

**Second: Possible outcomes**

**A number of possible outcomes of the need for uranium can be anticipated as follows:**

**Increasing importance of nuclear energy:** Due to geopolitical factors, countries’ need for nuclear energy has increased increasingly over time in the production of electricity and countries’ efforts to secure their needs in the long term, for example:

* **Iran-Niger deal:** Iran found that the military coup was an opportunity to strengthen its country’s supply of uranium, especially in light of the deal concluded between it and Niger in February 2024, with the aim of continuing the expansion of nuclear energy production by 2040, free from US sanctions. in order to keep pace with the policy of nuclear escalation; its success represents a strategic shift in international relations.
* **Türkiye- Niger deal:** The absence of France from the Niger uranium market, due to the aforementioned reasons, in addition to the export restrictions supported by Turkish President Recep Erdogan, has led to the emergence of other countries in the competition to benefit from this wealth, most notably the countries targeting Niger uranium, including Turkey, which aims to establish its first nuclear power plant. Indeed, on 10/22/2024, Turkey and Niger signed a memorandum stating cooperation between the two countries in the field of mining, during the visit of Niger Minister of Mining, Abrashi Osman, to Istanbul; Turkish Energy Minister Alp Arslan confirmed this in a post on the X platform, saying, “I believe that through the agreements we have signed, our ongoing cooperation in the field of mining will develop to higher levels, and I hope that this agreement, which will support development in both countries, will be beneficial to our two countries” (8). It is a step that strengthens Turkey’s position in the competition with France, the European Union, and Canada over uranium resources in Niger.
* ** Türkiye -Russia deal:** While Turkey wants uranium supplies for its Mediterranean-facing Akkuyu plant – its first nuclear power plant, built by Russia’s state-run Rosatom – and two other planned facilities**.**
* **Chinese-Niger relations:** Despite its economic interests affected by the military coup against President Mohamed Bazoum, it was calmer in dealing with the crisis. This is due to China’s ability to manage many gold and uranium mines due to the nature of the relationship between the authorities in both China and Niger, which contributed to increasing the volume of trade exchange between the two countries, which was positively reflected in China obtaining the rights to operate mines and ports. In addition, removing the Western camp from Niger will be in China’s interest (9), as Niger is a virgin land for China; it benefits from its precious strategic resources, especially uranium, which is found in few and far-flung points around the world - especially since China is one of the countries that consumes the most uranium**.**

**International actions to secure its uranium needs:** This is done by signing agreements that would supply countries with their uranium needs when they need it, such as the agreement signed between Iran and Niger.

International competition for uranium reserves in Niger: This is through the major countries searching for this mineral in the country, and this is evident in the management of the French company "Arriva" to extend to more than three nuclear power stations for the "o.d.f" electricity company in France due to its obtaining the concession to exploit it for a long time, in addition to the competition of American and French companies interested in this mineral.

**An ambitious vision for Africa's energy infrastructure:** This is in light of the interest of the military leadership in Niamey with the parties interested in the Algerian-Niger gas pipeline, which is about 418 km long and costs $13 billion to pump about $30 billion worth of gas annually if both countries want the project to succeed, on the basis that the country is on a hot coal in light of an unstable security situation. (10)

**In sum, despite the negative repercussions on the international conflict against Niger due to uranium as a result of the military coup that overthrew Bazoum, there are two scenarios as follows:**

**Scenario 1:** **The Military Council's continued determination to manage the conflict over uranium:** Despite the heavy cost to Niger of the military council taking over the leadership, it is aware of this in order to get rid of French influence; Niger is one of the three largest suppliers of uranium to France, and to operate its 56 nuclear reactors in the 18 power plants in France, its needs about 8,000 tons of uranium annually. The continuation of this package will support close relations with Russia and China, which benefit from France’s containment in the African Sahel, in addition to Turkey, which is one of the countries that profit from French containment.

**Scenario 2: US military presence in Africa**: In light of America not announcing its rejection of the military coup and describing it as a “military seizure of power,” in order to avoid a complete break with the new Niger rulers, in order to achieve one of the following three conditions: Russian forces not entering Niger, continued coordination between US forces and their military bases and the authorities in Niger to confront security threats, and perhaps security and time planning at the same time to preserve the safety of “Bazoum.”

**Conclusion:**

After monitoring the role of uranium in the conflict against Niger from different countries of the world, the research paper concluded with the following results:

1. Even though Niger is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, However, it is considered the poorest country in the world, in light of France’s keenness to monopolize uranium without developing alternative plans to revive the economy of Niger and its people.
2. It became clear how much France relied on uranium to supply its energy needs, which led to an increase in French interest in that mineral as its needs for it increased, and thus it sought to control it, monopolize it, and sell it to Western countries.
3. The importance of uranium in the sanctions imposed by most Western countries as a result of the military coup, due to their fear of controlling uranium ore, even if some countries did not show the extent of their objection, such as the United States of America, in light of its political and economic interests.
4. How upset Niger is with ECOWAS due to its alliance with Western countries against it.
5. Despite the concern and excitement of some countries towards the uranium mineral in Niger, some have benefited from it, even if the repercussions were somewhat negative, but they lie behind economic interests resulting from the conclusion of agreements between it and Niger that pave the way for it with uranium to operate its nuclear reactors in the future until 2040, especially the state of Iran, not to mention the welcome of some countries to this as a winning card to get rid of France's dominance over uranium in France.

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