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Niger: Near Term Prospects

**Summary**

[redacted] 55-year-old President Senyi Kountche is in ill-health, and the lack of established succession procedures raise the prospect of a leadership crisis that could, at least potentially, serve Libyan efforts to gain influence over yet another moderate neighbor. Niger is an important source of uranium for the West and has served as a barrier to Libyan efforts to dominate the Sahel region of Sub-Saharan Africa. Nigerien officials, however, have long expressed concern to the US Embassy that their country is vulnerable to subversion because of Libya's continued occupation of northern Chad and ties to neighboring Benin and Burkina. Moreover, they worry that Libya's construction of an airfield along the northern border will strengthen Qadhafi's claim to a small triangle of territory across Niger's border that adjoins Chad's Aozou Strip. [redacted]

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Kountche's tentative moves to return the country to civilian rule and revitalize Niger's deteriorating economy--the result of an extended slump in uranium prices and the effects of last year's drought--also have clouded prospects for an orderly succession by arousing discontent within the military. Senior officers are reluctant to surrender the perquisites of office, and would probably move to

This memorandum was prepared for Clark A. Murdock, Director of African Affairs, National Security Council. It was written [redacted] West Africa Branch, Office of African and Latin American Analysis and coordinated with the Office of Neareast and Southeast Asia, Office of European Analysis, and the Directorate of Operations. Comments and Queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Africa Division, [redacted]

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take over the government in the event of Kountche's death. France, Niamey's major source of aid, military assistance, trade, and investment would probably support a regime led by moderate senior officers. We believe, however, that Paris' own economic problems will result in diminished aid levels over the next several years and increase the vulnerability of a less experienced leader to Libyan overtures. [redacted]

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Pitfalls of One Man Rule

Although we cannot confirm reports that Kountche's health is failing, they highlight Niger's vulnerability to a sudden crisis provoked by the death of the President in whom power is concentrated. A source of the US Embassy reports that Kountche collapsed during a visit to an agricultural project [redacted]

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[redacted] it is becoming increasingly difficult for the President to carry out his duties [redacted]

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Niger thus shares the vulnerability of many African states to a political crisis brought on by the death of a highly autocratic leader who has failed to make credible arrangements for his succession. Kountche has kept a tight grip on political power since his takeover by a military coup in 1974. The US Embassy reports that Kountche continues to rule by decree, makes all government appointments, and tries to carefully control the pace of political change. Instead of forming a political party system as an initial step toward civilian rule, in 1979 Kountche established the National Development Society, which consists of a hierarchical network of councils at the village, regional, department, and national levels. Since then, the President has taken some tentative steps toward political liberalization, but his preoccupation with security and opposition from some of his senior officers to a return to civilian rule have left untouched the military's position as the final arbiter of power, according to US Embassy officials. [redacted]

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Domestic Challenges Ahead

In our view, growing disaffection in the Army will impair Kountche's or a successor's ability to govern effectively over the next few years. Military confidence in the President is likely to erode if he pursues austerity but is unable, as seems likely, to spur a quick recovery in the fundamentally weak economy. Recurrent drought, a large foreign debt, and the depressed world market for uranium--the country's largest export earner--probably will continue to drain government resources through the end of the decade. Moreover, declining living standards could create a climate conducive to the spread of Islamic fundamentalism among Niger's predominantly Muslim populace.

Military Restiveness. A takeover attempt in 1983 by one of Kountche's closest advisers brought into sharp focus the regime's dependence on the 3,500-man military, which put down the abortive coup. A review of US Embassy reporting indicates that senior officers, concerned over Kountche's plans to move toward civilian rule, are taking steps to forestall erosion of their power. Officials of the Supreme Military Council (SMC)--Niger's highest ruling body made up of 12 senior military officers--earlier this year blocked a move by the President to replace several of its influential members with officers more loyal to him. This marked the council's first major challenge to Kountche's authority since its formation in 1974, according to the US Embassy. Moreover, the Embassy reports that senior officers reacted to the promulgation of a draft constitution last year by inducing Kountche to emphasize publicly the military's central role in government. In the Embassy's assessment, senior officers also have tried to block Kountche's efforts to open the political system by installing military officers at the highest levels of the National Development Society. [redacted]

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At the same time, [redacted] that junior officers and enlisted men, many of whom are leftist leaning, have fewer opportunities than senior officers to supplement their income, and are frustrated over limited advancement opportunities. The better-educated junior officers are piqued at their superiors, who they believe rely too heavily on French advisers to do their work, and are lazy and corrupt. [redacted]

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[redacted] a government decision to reduce drastically military housing subsidies caused widespread grumbling in the enlisted ranks because of already low salaries. Earlier this year, the [redacted]

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[redacted] noncommissioned officers to remote interior posts after discovering that they were meeting secretly to grumble about poor advancement opportunities. [redacted]

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The Struggling Economy. Niger's dependence on subsistence agriculture, which employs over 90 percent of its 6 million people, and the 5-year-old world slump in uranium prices pose almost insurmountable

obstacles to economic growth. Despite the return of sufficient rainfall this year, Niger is still recovering from last year's drought that necessitated massive Western food aid. Food imports were required again this year, and the US Agency for International Development estimates the replenishment of livestock--the country's second major export after uranium--will require up to four years. Even with food assistance, serious pockets of hunger will exist for the foreseeable future, according to the Embassy. [redacted]

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Niger's uranium deposits, among world's largest, are its only easily exploitable source of wealth, but our analysis suggests that world prices will remain depressed for at least several years, curtailing any new development efforts. The Embassy reports that uranium exports, accounting for 25 percent of government revenues in 1985, dropped another 15 percent in 1986. Uranium production is expected to remain near present levels through the end of the decade, but the existence of more accessible, richer deposits in other countries, and large stockpiles by major consumers reduce the likelihood an upturn in demand for Nigerien uranium before the mid-1990s. [redacted]

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Niamey also will face heavy debt service obligations for debt contracted in the early 1980s when Niger mistakenly anticipated continued high uranium prices. A review of Embassy reporting indicates that Niger's debt, which totaled about \$790 million in 1985 and is calculated to reach \$842 million by 1987, forced it to reschedule debt repayments and adopt IMF recommended austerity measures. Niger signed its third IMF standby agreement last December, recently reached an agreement with the World Bank for a \$60 million structural adjustment loan, and has rescheduled its debt with the Paris and London clubs. Even with comprehensive debt rescheduling, debt service will consume about 33 percent of government revenue this year, according to Embassy sources. [redacted]

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Although Kountche's economic austerity program has made some headway, it has begun to draw public opposition, which we judge probably will increase if Kountche--or a successor regime--continues to seek ways to solve Niger's economic problems. Over the last several years, the government has gradually cut spending levels, adopted agricultural reforms designed to encourage production, and streamlined some state enterprises, but has yet to reduce the bloated civil service workforce, according to US Embassy and press reports. A new business tax initiated by the government last January in response to IMF recommendations has already caused several large private businesses to close and is coming under increasing public criticism, according to the US Embassy. Labor unions and college graduates, already restive over high unemployment, fear additional bankruptcies will sharply increase joblessness and raise prices on basic commodities, according to the Embassy. Moreover, the public increasingly believes that the President's family and government ministers embezzle

public funds and are deeply involved in the black market trade between Niger and Nigeria, according to the Embassy. [redacted]

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The Islamic Factor. Nigerien officials have expressed concern to US Embassy officers that Nigerian or Libyan-backed firebrands could rally fundamentalist converts among Niger's Sunni Muslims, who comprise 90 percent of the population. According to press reports, Libya seeks to undermine the regime by influencing the growing numbers of disgruntled junior officers, enlisted men, and students attracted to Islamic fundamentalism. Members of the influential Muslim community in Nigeria report that one of Nigeria's largest Islamic fundamentalist groups has plans to establish branches in Niger. Nigerien authorities worry that these fundamentalist groups will exploit family and religious ties between the Hausa\* majority in Niger--about 50 percent of the population--and the Hausa community in northern Nigeria to spread radical political and religious reform across the Nigerian border, according to the US Embassy. [redacted]

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#### The Libyan Threat

[redacted] Recent press reports indicate that Libya is attempting to unify Nigeriens opposed to the Kountche regime living in Libya and France under the banner of the People's Front for the Liberation of Niger (FPLN), with the goal of overthrowing the government. Kountche fears that many of the 1,100 Nigeriens in Libya--including politically motivated opponents, mercenaries who have joined the "Islamic Legion" in the Libyan Army, and individuals seeking employment--will return to subvert his regime, according to the US Embassy. Moreover, Kountche believes he is on Qadhafi's hit list, and has noted to US officials that Qadhafi--who was implicated in a plot to assassinate Kountche in 1981 and an abortive coup attempt in 1983--continues to try to infiltrate the Nigerien Army and penetrate student and labor movements through the eight-man Libyan People's Bureau in Niamey. [redacted]

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\* Niger's three major tribes include the Hausa, Djerma, and the Tuareg representing 50, 25, and 10 percent of the population, respectively. The Hausa dominate the business community, while the Djerma control the government and the military. The Tuaregs are a nomadic tribe that roams the southwestern Sahara Desert. [redacted]

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Libya also continues to recruit and train northern Nigerien tribesmen to attack government officials and installations, according to press reporting. Libya has long influenced the northern Tuareg nomads, who resent the southern-dominated government's efforts to restrict their wanderings across the southwestern Sahara Desert. Qadhafi publicly called on the Tuaregs to revolt against the government in 1980, and Nigerien officials allege that Libya was behind a plot by Tuaregs in April 1982 to blow up a uranium plant. Libya was also implicated in the unsuccessful attack last year by 14 Tuaregs on a remote northern government outpost at Tchín-Tabaraden (see map), according to the Embassy. In our view, Qadhafi is especially sensitive to the vulnerability of Libya's southern border, and he may believe a US military aid project to resurface Niger's Dirkou Airfield is intended to support US operations against Libya. We suspect he might try to encourage a Tuareg guerrilla attack on the airfield. [redacted]

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Nigerien officials believe that periodic Libyan violations of the northern border are designed to bolster Tripoli's claim to a small section of disputed territory along Chad's Aozou Strip, according to the Embassy. The US defense attache reports that a company of 250 Nigerien soldiers patrols the isolated northeastern region, but is ill-equipped to monitor the area that is about half the size of Texas. [redacted] patrols repeatedly violated the border earlier this year, and a Nigerien patrol saw some 25 Libyan military personnel camped approximately 50 kilometers inside the Nigerien border last March,

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[redacted] just inside its border, which is capable of accepting heavy transport aircraft. Although bilateral talks were held with Libyan officials this year to resolve the border issue, they did little to reassure Niamey the Libyan encroachment would end, according to the Embassy. [redacted]

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France's Key Role

Despite expanded ties with other Western capitals, Niamey continues to protect its traditionally strong relations with France. The Embassy estimates total French bilateral economic assistance for 1986 at about \$43 million, twice the amount of the second largest donor, the United States. During Kountche's state visit to Paris last month, the French government promised an additional \$6 million in budgetary support and an increase in French uranium purchases, according to the US Embassy in Paris. France, which manages and owns controlling interests in Niger's two functioning uranium mines, also helps subsidize the economy by importing more uranium from Niger than it probably needs, at a cost above

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the world market price, according to the US Embassy. Although the number of French businessmen in Niger--about 4,000--is declining due to bleak commercial prospects, France remains Niamey's largest trading partner. The Embassy reports that Niger imported \$91 million in goods from France and exported \$176 million in 1984, the last year for which reliable data are available. [redacted]

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Niger continues to look to Paris to guarantee its security, despite the absence of a formal mutual defense treaty. France's annual military assistance to Niger includes about \$3 million in military credits and another \$15 million to support 160 French military advisers in the country. The Embassy reports that French advisers are attached to various units throughout the Nigerien military. The French delivery of five armored personnel carriers and five Landrovers last spring enhanced Niger's ability to patrol the eastern desert regions, [redacted]. [redacted] Nigerien confidence in French willingness to protect the region from Libyan expansion was bolstered last February after Paris sent a 1,300-man military contingent to Chad to repel a Libyan-backed Chadian rebel offensive, according to the US Embassy. [redacted]

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Despite these close ties, however, we believe France's own diminishing economic resources are likely to constrain assistance levels at a time when Niger's needs and those of other francophone states are soaring. Although Paris still provides more aid than any other donor, its aid levels to Africa, which have vacillated markedly since 1980, reveal an overall downward trend of 3 percent. The US Embassy in Paris reports that France is urging African governments to encourage private economic investments, and is considering the creation of a French-African co-investment fund to finance investments in former colonies such as Niger, to help offset aid cutbacks. [redacted]

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### US Ties

Niamey has strengthened relations with the United States over the last two years, probably in an effort to diversify sources of Western support. Kountche highly values US aid and believes that US emergency food assistance--100,000 tons totaling \$40 million--was crucial to maintaining the stability of his government during the 1984-85 drought and famine, according to the Embassy. Embassy sources report Niger will receive about \$16 million in US development aid in 1986 and is allocated another \$5 million in economic support funds. [redacted]

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US military assistance has increased in the past several years and last year totaled over \$5 million, including the rehabilitation of Dirkou Airfield to help Niger defend its borders from Libyan aggression. US aid also equipped a parachute company, built military barracks, and provided small arms, according to the US Embassy. The Embassy also reports that 20

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Nigerien military personnel came to the US for training in 1985. We believe Kountche politely declined a recent US offer to conduct joint military exercises, however, to avoid offending his primary donor, France, and possibly provoking stepped-up subversion by Libya, according to US Embassy sources. [redacted]

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### Prospects for Succession

The absence of a designated successor and of a formalized procedure for selecting and installing one (and political institutions capable of managing a smooth transfer of power) raise the real possibility of a leadership crisis in Niger in the event of Kountche's death. In our view, the Supreme Military Council, by virtue of its command of military force, is the only institution that could intercede in a succession crisis to choose a new leader, and it probably would select someone from within its own ranks. Although a leadership vacuum would likely spark infighting and jockeying for position among SMC members, we believe they would try to close ranks behind one of their members to protect their vested interests in the system. [redacted]

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In our view, Lt. Col. Moumoni Djermakoye Adamou is the most likely member of the SMC to emerge as a successor. He is highly regarded within the military establishment and among the general population, and according to Embassy reports, he is the only SMC member to have an independent powerbase--stemming from his influence as the son of the "king" of the Djerma ethnic group and the popularity he enjoys as a local prefect. Djermakoye is also an experienced and competent administrator, credited with efficient management of drought relief last year and during the great drought of the early 1970s. [redacted]

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If the SMC could not agree on a new leader and a prolonged period of uncertainty ensued, some faction within the group might be tempted to seize power by force. Under these circumstances, Col. Ali Saibou, Armed Forces Chief of Staff, would be a likely candidate to launch such a coup. He is popular among the rank and file, according to the US Embassy, and helped engineer the coup that brought Kountche to power in 1974. Despite his good standing with the military, he is regarded as inept by many Nigeriens after failing to effectively distribute food aid in recent years. [redacted]

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In our judgment, Western relations with Niger would suffer the least damage, at least over the near term, if Kountche were replaced by a senior officer, such as Djermakoye or Saibou. Efforts to civilianize the government probably would be put on hold, but both men probably would continue Kountche's pro-Western policies. We believe such a senior officer would not want to alter France's guardian role and would continue to look to Paris as a principal source of military and economic support.

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For its part, however, Paris would be unlikely to intervene directly in the succession process unless vital French interests or the security of its nationals were threatened. France would likely use its considerable influence to ensure some measure of effectiveness by a new, friendly government. [redacted]

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In our view, Niger's seemingly insurmountable economic problems pose a key challenge to any leader and portend increasing military factionalism and public unrest over the longer term. Despite additional belt-tightening measures, the economy will remain fragile and vulnerable to drought. Barring an unlikely upturn in the world uranium market, the country probably will remain dependent on Western donors, particularly France, to help stave off further deterioration in living conditions. In the event of a dramatic weakening of the economy by another drought, a new leader almost certainly would find it more difficult than Kountche to manage the impact of austerity and protect the interests of his political backers. While Kountche has proved adept at coopting the opposition and diffusing contentious political issues, a successor--and especially someone like Saibou with limited popular support--might be forced to resort to repression, and in doing so undermine popular confidence in his rule. [redacted]

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We believe it is possible, though less likely, that opportunistic junior officers or enlisted men favoring radical policies--possibly modeling themselves after populist leaders in neighboring Ghana and Burkina--could muster enough support to launch a successful coup. These men, however, could exploit a prolonged stalemate in the SMC to rally rank-and-file support with promises to redress what they see as corruption and neglect of enlisted personnel by senior officers. We believe a regime led by lower ranking personnel probably would seek to distance itself from the West and possibly look to Libya, at least initially, for support. [redacted]

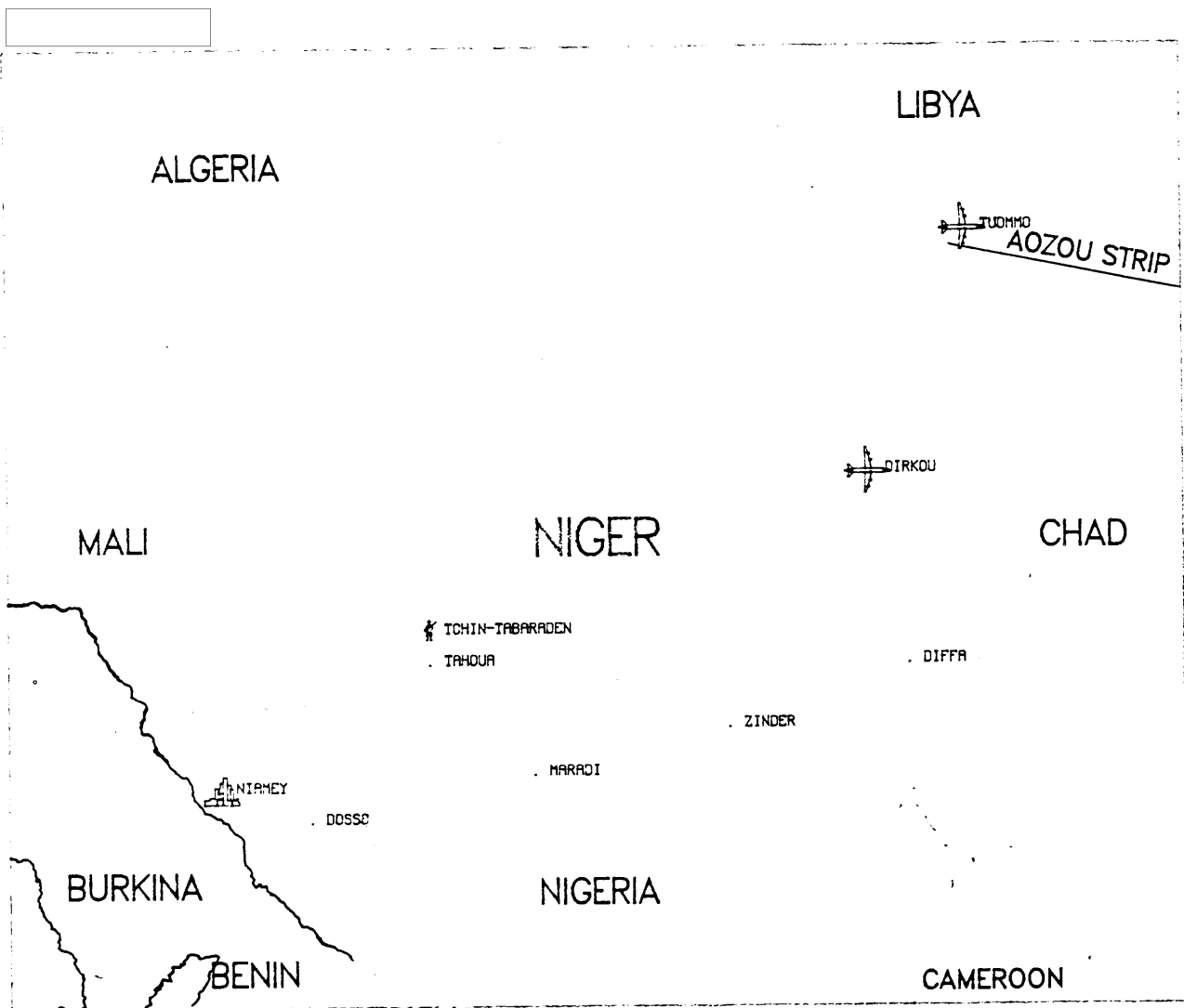
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A pro-Libyan regime in Niamey, in our judgment, would provide Qadhafi with a considerable propaganda victory. Qadhafi, who in the past has sought a quadripartite defense arrangement with friendly regimes in Burkina, Benin, and Ghana could try to forge a similar agreement with a new regime in Niger. At a minimum, a pro-Libyan regime in Niamey would serve further to intimidate moderate regimes in the region. Qadhafi might well try to use a friendly Niger as a base for subversion against northern Nigeria, and step up pressure on the Chadian government. In exchange for Libyan economic and security assistance, Tripoli might pressure the regime to cede the disputed border territory or make Libya the primary customer of Nigerien uranium. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: Niger: Near Term Prospects

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