



Niger

Military officers seized power in Niger in July 2023, part of a wave of coups in Africa since 2020. The junta, led by former Presidential Guard commander General Abdourahamane Tchiani, has detained elected president Mohamed Bazoum and declined, to date, to issue a clear roadmap for returning power to civilians. Leaders in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have imposed economic sanctions and threatened (though not carried out) a military intervention to reverse the coup. The Biden Administration has condemned the coup and imposed restrictions on U.S. aid and security cooperation.

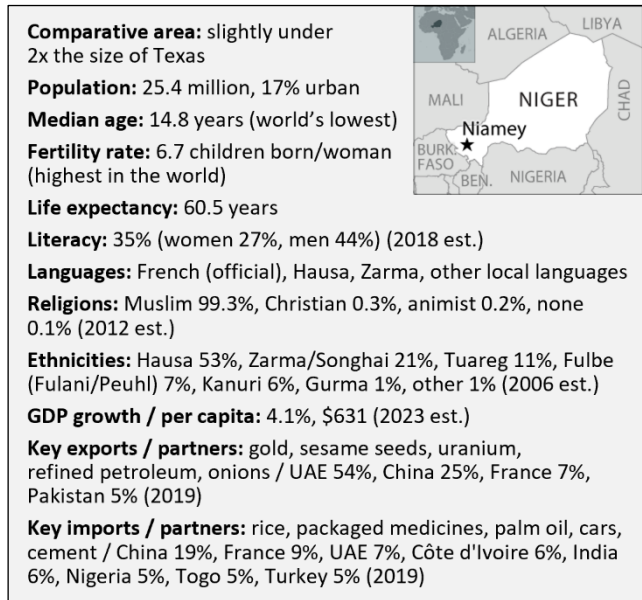
The military takeover in Niger deepens the challenges facing U.S. policymakers in the Sahel, amid growing insurgencies, political instability, and Russian engagement in the region. Officials had previously characterized Niger as an emerging democracy and important U.S. security and development partner. Niger hosts the second-largest U.S. military presence in Africa after Djibouti, with about 1,000 U.S. soldiers as of June 2023, mostly located at facilities in the capital, Niamey, and the northern city of Agadez. U.S. forces resumed intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations in September after a temporary pause following the coup. About 650 U.S. soldiers were in Niger as of December 2023, per a public White House war powers report.

While permitting U.S. military personnel to remain, the junta has expelled French troops—ending U.S.-backed counterterrorism operations—and pursued closer ties to Russia. In late 2023, the junta halted European Union (EU) security and migration cooperation initiatives. These moves have leveraged (and stoked) local resentment of France, the former colonial power and a key player in Niger’s economically vital uranium mining sector. Niger’s military authorities have established an alliance with fellow populist juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso, which have likewise expelled French troops and drawn closer to Russia.

Context

Landlocked and arid, Niger is one of the world’s poorest countries. Coups and armed rebellions have marked its history. The last coup was in 2010; authorities reported coup attempts in 2021 and 2022. President Bazoum’s inauguration in 2021 marked Niger’s first-ever transition between two elected presidents. Insurgents affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) are active in border regions and in neighboring countries. Conflicts involving these groups have displaced hundreds of thousands of Nigeriens and caused military and civilian casualties. The IS Sahel affiliate claimed a 2017 deadly ambush of U.S. soldiers in Niger, and several U.S. citizens have been kidnapped in Niger and held by terrorist groups. (All have since been freed.) Socioeconomic conditions deteriorated in the lead-up to the 2023 coup, due to factors such as security threats, the global effects of the Russia-Ukraine war, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1. Niger at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Data from CIA *World Factbook*, IMF.

Niger assumed increasing importance as an anchor of Western security cooperation in the Sahel over the past decade, exhibiting relative stability as other governments fell to military coups, and agreeing to host sizable U.S. and European troop contingents. President Bazoum also was one of the few regional leaders to openly criticize Russia’s Wagner Group, which began operating in Mali in 2021. In 2022, France increased its troop presence in Niger after being forced to withdraw its military from Mali.

Deposed President Bazoum, a former cabinet minister, was elected in 2021, succeeding close ally Mahamadou Issoufou in what many observers perceived as a managed transition. Although observers generally deemed the elections credible, a prominent opposition figure was barred from running due to a criminal conviction that some viewed as biased, and the losing candidate rejected the results as fraudulent. Protests and rioting erupted after results were released, and authorities claimed to foil a coup attempt. Freedom House rated Niger as “Partly Free” under Bazoum, noting multiparty competition along with state “persecution” and “co-option” of opposition leaders. The State Department reported concerns about apparent harassment of civil society groups and journalists, and authorities restricted some civil liberties, including protests.

Prelude to the coup. The growing foreign troop presence, President Bazoum’s close ties to France, and Niger’s cooperation with the EU to counter migrant flows (from which some in Niger derive income) prompted local backlash, including protests and rioting in 2021 and 2022. Although security trends were relatively positive in 2023, some of Bazoum’s policies, including a reintegration

program for Islamist insurgent defectors, reportedly spurred discontent within the armed forces. Bazoum's efforts to sideline Presidential Guard chief Tchiani and demotion of military chief of staff Salifou Mody (now the junta's number two) notably backfired. Bazoum also reportedly engaged in a behind-the-scenes power struggle with Issoufou over control of the ruling party and emergent oil revenues. Some observers allege that Issoufou, who had elevated Tchiani and Mody within the armed forces, played a role in the coup, which the former president has denied.

Terrorist and Insurgent Threats and Responses

Several U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) are active in parts of Niger, including the Mali-based regional Al Qaeda affiliate, known as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM), and a rival IS affiliate. Southeastern Niger is threatened by Nigerian-led Boko Haram and its offshoot, IS-West Africa. U.S. officials have characterized Sahel-based FTOs as threatening U.S. interests and nationals within the region. Southern Niger also faces spillover of criminal and communal violence from northwest Nigeria.

Over the past decade, Niger pursued military operations against insurgents, conducted large military recruitment drives, and acquired defense materiel from Western donors and other partners (including Russia, China, and Turkey). A defense procurement corruption scandal emerged under former President Issoufou, with little apparent accountability. Niger participated in multiple donor-backed regional security initiatives and in the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali (which is ending in late 2023). Nigerien officials asserted that rising security needs limited the availability of domestic resources for socioeconomic programs. With U.S. and other donor support, Bazoum's administration opened talks with some Islamist insurgents and offered to help defectors reintegrate into civilian life.

Whether Niger's counterinsurgency tactics will shift under military rule is in question. To date, unlike some of its neighbors, Niger has generally not armed ethnic militias or civilian vigilantes, and allegations of security force abuses have been rarer than in some other countries in the region. In 2020, however, human rights groups accused soldiers in Niger of forcibly disappearing nearly 200 people during an operation near the Mali border.

Russian Outreach

Russia's Wagner Group has operated in Mali since 2021, and Russia has sought to expand its defense partnerships in the Sahel. (Since Wagner's failed mutiny in Russia in mid-2023 and the subsequent death of its founder, Russian officials have signaled that Africa operations will continue under more direct control from Moscow.) For the Sahel's military leaders, outreach to Russia appears to serve several purposes, including as a rejection of France's postcolonial influence, a populist bid for domestic legitimacy, and a means to seek foreign security support on new terms.

In December 2023, Niger's new military authorities welcomed a delegation led by Russia's Deputy Minister of Defense and pledged to strengthen bilateral defense cooperation. In subsequent remarks to a U.S. audience, Niger's junta-appointed prime minister stated that Niger was open to working with any foreign powers to advance its interests, citing both Russia and the United States.

The Economy and Humanitarian Conditions

While most Nigeriens are engaged in agriculture and/or livestock herding, the formal economy centers on uranium mining and oil production. Niger is a top uranium producer, and the sector is of particular importance to France, which relies on uranium for electricity and nuclear defense. The prominent role of a French state-controlled uranium firm, Orano (ex-Areva) has drawn criticism from local activists, who also cite health and environmental concerns linked to mining. Oil production began in the early 2010s, and is mostly used for domestic consumption. An export pipeline to Benin is under construction, but regional sanctions have caused delays in 2023. Niger also has coal and other minerals. China is the second top foreign investor after France; state-owned PetroChina is a key player in the oil sector. Turkey has also been a prominent economic partner.

Limited arable land, high population growth, and regular droughts and flooding—possibly worsened by climate change—have fueled widespread food insecurity and malnutrition. Other health issues include malaria and outbreaks of measles, meningitis, cholera, and polio. Child marriage and adolescent motherhood are common; access to education is limited, especially for girls and in rural areas. Conflict-related displacement has further strained local communities and obstructed service delivery.

U.S. Relations, Military Presence, and Aid

The Biden Administration has condemned the July 2023 coup, pressed the junta to release President Bazoum, and expressed support for ECOWAS's efforts to "return Niger to a democratic path." U.S. officials have not backed ECOWAS' threat of military intervention or sanctions, which aid groups have decried as indiscriminate. U.S. Ambassador Kathleen FitzGibbon presented her credentials to the military-led government in December 2023.

In October 2023, the State Department applied coup-related restrictions on certain aid to the government under §7008 of annual aid appropriations measures. Humanitarian and democracy aid, among other areas, is exempt, while Congress has authorized or appropriated certain other aid "notwithstanding" such restrictions. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) has suspended a five-year, \$443 million development aid compact with Niger and preparatory work on a second, regional compact with Niger and Benin. The Administration has also terminated Niger's eligibility for trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). The Defense Department has halted security cooperation while retaining a footprint in Niger, including in support of ISR operations. The Administration has stated a desire to "resume security and development cooperation in phases," contingent on Niger's progress in transitioning back to elected civilian rule.

The United States allocated \$92 million in bilateral aid for Niger in FY2022 (latest public data), with health and agriculture top areas of focus. The Administration requested \$107 million for Niger in FY2024. Security assistance, which was substantial prior to the coup, was largely provided via regional and global programs.

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