



Niger

A military junta led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani, a former Presidential Guard commander, seized power in July 2023, part of a wave of coups in Africa. In March 2024, the junta rescinded Niger's status of forces agreement (SOFA) with the United States, which underpins one of the largest U.S. troop presences in Africa, at 648 soldiers as of late 2023 (down from over 1,000 prior to the coup). The decision came after U.S. officials expressed concern about "Niger's potential relationships with Russia and Iran," as U.S. officials later publicly confirmed. Events in Niger have deepened the challenges facing U.S. policymakers in the Sahel, amid growing insurgencies, political instability, and Russian engagement in the region. Prior to the coup, U.S. officials characterized Niger as an emerging democracy and important security and development partner.

The Biden Administration has condemned the 2023 coup and restricted U.S. aid and security cooperation. The Department of Defense (DOD) has indicated that all counterterrorism cooperation has been suspended, and that U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations in the country, which restarted in September 2023, are conducted for "force protection" purposes only.

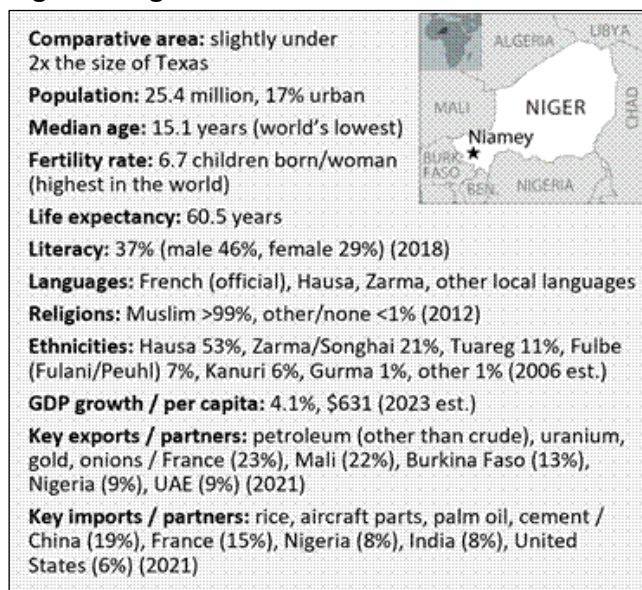
After seizing power, the junta expelled France's ambassador and roughly 1,500 French troops, who had conducted U.S.-supported counterterrorism operations. It also ended European Union security cooperation programs. These moves leveraged (and stoked) local resentment of France, the former colonial power and a key player in Niger's economy and 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.

The junta has declined to issue a clear roadmap for returning power to civilians, and continues to detain former elected president Mohamed Bazoum. Other leaders in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) initially threatened a military intervention to reverse the coup and imposed broad economic sanctions. ECOWAS has since downplayed the threat of military action and lifted sanctions in February 2024 after Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso stated they would leave the bloc.

Context

Landlocked and arid, Niger is one of the world's poorest countries. Coups and armed rebellions have marked its history. Insurgents affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) are active in border regions and neighboring countries. Conflicts involving these groups have displaced hundreds of thousands of Nigeriens and caused military and civilian casualties. The IS Sahel affiliate also claimed a 2017 deadly ambush of U.S. soldiers in Niger, and over the past decade, several U.S. citizens were kidnapped in Niger and held by regional terrorist groups. (All were later freed, at times pursuant to Nigerien mediation.)

Figure 1. Niger at a Glance



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

President Bazoum's inauguration in 2021 marked Niger's first-ever transition between two elected presidents. He succeeded close ally Mahamadou Issoufou in what many perceived as a managed transition. Although observers generally deemed the 2020-2021 elections credible, a prominent opposition figure was barred from running for president due to a criminal conviction that supporters 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.

Under Presidents Issoufou and Bazoum, Niger assumed increasing importance as an anchor of Western security cooperation in the Sahel, as both leaders agreed to host U.S. and Western troop contingents while other governments in the region fell to military coups. President Bazoum was also 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.

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 military integration program for some 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. A defense procurement corruption scandal emerged under former President Issoufou, with little apparent accountability. Bazoum also reportedly engaged in a 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 Sahel affiliate that operate along western borders with Mali. Niger's southeast 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 recruitment drives, and acquired defense materiel from Western donors and other partners (including Russia, China, and Turkey). Niger participated in multiple donor-backed regional security initiatives and in the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali (which ended in late 2023 at the demand of Mali's ruling junta). Nigerien officials asserted that rising security needs limited resources available for socioeconomic programs.

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

Russia and Iran

For military leaders in the Sahel, outreach to Russia appears to serve as a rejection of France's postcolonial influence, a populist bid for domestic legitimacy, and a means to seek external security support on new terms. Mali's junta sought counterinsurgency support from Russia's Wagner Group in 2021; in early 2024, Russia deployed some 100 personnel to Burkina Faso and announced defense agreements with Niger. Since Wagner's nominal demise in mid-2023, Russian officials have asserted more direct control over its operations in Africa. Wagner's successor group, so-called Africa Corps or Expeditionary Corps, has stated plans to deploy to Niger, and Niger hosted Russia's deputy defense minister in late 2023.

Niger's Prime Minister Lamine Zeine led a delegation to Russia and Iran in early 2024, reportedly sparking U.S. concerns about Iranian access to Niger's uranium.

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 also has coal and other minerals. Niger is a top uranium producer, and the sector has been of particular importance to France, which uses uranium for domestic 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, developed and operated by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), came online in early 2024. Turkey has also been a prominent economic partner, including in the construction sector.

Limited arable land, high population growth, and regular droughts and flooding—potentially 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 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 did not back ECOWAS' threat of military intervention or sanctions, which aid groups criticized as indiscriminate. U.S. Ambassador Kathleen FitzGibbon presented her credentials to the military-led government in December 2023.

The State Department has applied coup-related restrictions on U.S. aid "to the government" under §7008 of annual aid appropriations measures. The Administration has proposed \$82 million in bilateral aid to Niger in FY2025, down from \$107 million allocated in FY2023 (latest). (The FY2023 figure does not capture most security assistance prior to the coup, which was provided under State Department regional and global programs, and by DOD.) The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) also suspended a \$443 million development aid compact, along with preparatory work on Niger's portion of a regional compact with Benin. The Administration terminated Niger's eligibility for trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act.

Various types of aid are either exempt from §7008 or authorized to continue "notwithstanding" such restrictions. The provision is also silent with regard to DOD operations. U.S. officials have testified that the Administration has suspended "even security assistance and cooperation that is not required to be limited by the law." Prior to the junta's decision to abrogate the U.S. SOFA in March 2024, and U.S. stated concerns about cooperation with Russia and Iran, U.S. officials had indicated a willingness to resume some suspended assistance and security cooperation if the junta released Bazoum and issued a calendar for elections.

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