



Niger: In Focus

On July 26, 2023, military officers detained elected President Mohamed Bazoum and asserted that they had seized power. On July 30, West African leaders announced sanctions and threatened military action if Bazoum is not reinstated, while pro-junta protesters attacked the French embassy in Niamey. U.S. officials had previously characterized Niger as an emerging democracy and important U.S. partner amid growing insurgencies, political instability, and Russian engagement in the Sahel region. Over 1,000 U.S. soldiers were stationed in Niger as of mid-2023, the second-largest U.S. military presence in Africa. Niger has been a top recipient of U.S. security assistance in Africa and a growing U.S. development aid recipient.

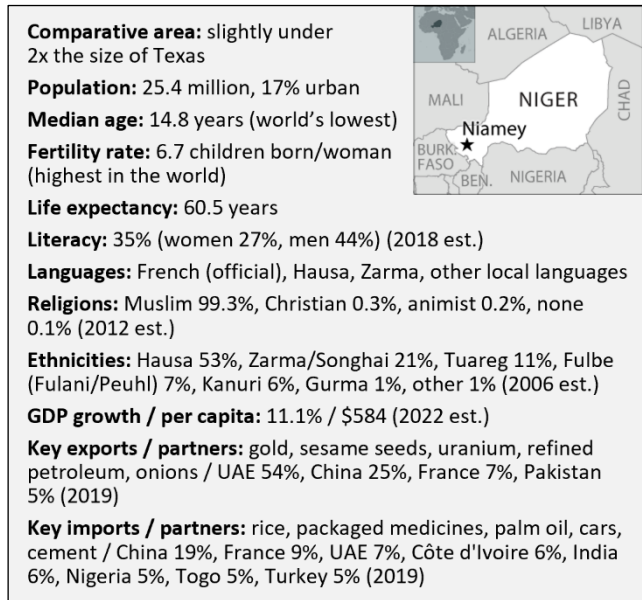
Context. President Bazoum’s inauguration in 2021 represented Niger’s first ever transition between two elected presidents. Niger last experienced a coup in 2010, and claimed to foil coup attempts in 2021 and 2022. If the current attempt stands, Niger will be the sixth country in Africa where the military has seized power since 2020.

Landlocked and arid, Niger is among the world’s poorest countries. Despite relative stability over the past decade, its history has been marked by coups and ethnic rebellions. Security threats, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russia-Ukraine war worsened socioeconomic hardships, historically a trigger for unrest. Insurgents affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) are active in border regions. Conflicts involving these groups have killed hundreds of Nigerien soldiers and civilians and displaced hundreds of thousands of Nigeriens. The Sahel-based IS affiliate killed four U.S. soldiers in western Niger in 2017, and terrorist groups have kidnapped U.S. citizens in Niger.

Regional Security Partner. The Western troop presence in Niger ballooned over the past decade as the country became a key regional security partner for the United States, France, and the European Union. France’s withdrawal of over 2,000 troops from Mali and Burkina Faso in 2022-2023, about half of whom were sent to Niger, magnified the country’s importance for Western-backed security efforts. Niger has also been a focus of European counter-migration initiatives. The growing foreign troop presence and the government’s close ties to former colonial power France have prompted some local backlash, including protests and rioting (e.g., in 2022, 2021, and 2015). Juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso have leveraged similar discontent.

Legal and policy concerns have complicated U.S. relations with other Sahel countries, further elevating Niger: The country’s elected leadership and relatively disciplined military have stood in contrast to neighboring Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad, where soldiers have seized power, repressed the opposition, and abused civilians during counterterrorism operations. President Bazoum was also one of the few regional leaders to openly criticize Russia’s Wagner Group, which has been active in Mali.

Figure 1. Niger at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Data from CIA *World Factbook* and IMF (2023).

Embattled Democracy

President Bazoum, a career politician and former cabinet minister, won election in 2021, succeeding longtime ally Mahamadou Issoufou, who had served two terms. Although observers generally deemed the 2020-2021 general elections credible, opposition groups criticized the decision to bar a prominent opposition politician from running (due to criminal charges that supporters viewed as politically motivated), and leading opposition candidate Mahamane Ousmane, a former president, rejected the results as fraudulent. Large protests and rioting erupted in Niamey in February 2021 following Bazoum’s victory in a run-off against Ousmane. Authorities arrested hundreds of protesters and reportedly disrupted internet service. Just before Bazoum’s inauguration, the government announced that it had put down a coup attempt. In 2022, Nigerien officials reported that they had foiled another plot.

Freedom House rated Niger as “Partly Free” as of early 2023, noting multiparty political competition alongside “persecution of opposition leaders and the co-option of key opposition figures.” Freedom House added that security concerns provided an “alibi” for civil liberties restrictions. Under Bazoum, civil society groups and media outlets were active and regularly criticized the government. The State Department’s 2022 human rights report indicated that there were no cases of political prisoners—“unlike in prior years”—but that “civil society activists and members of opposition political parties appeared to be especially subject to abuse of their due process rights.” Per the report, “the government continued to threaten and harass journalists.”

Terrorist and Insurgent Threats

Two Mali-based Islamist insurgent groups operate along Niger's western borders with Mali and Burkina Faso: an Al Qaeda affiliate known as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM) and a rival Islamic State (IS) Sahel affiliate. In the southeast, Niger is threatened by Nigerian-led Boko Haram and its IS-affiliated offshoot, IS-West Africa. These groups appear to pose a threat primarily at the local and regional level. Southern Niger also faces spillover of violence from northwest Nigeria.

Nigerien authorities have pursued military operations against Islamist insurgents, conducted large recruitment drives, and acquired new defense materiel from Western donors and other partners (notably Turkey). Bazoum's government also opened talks with insurgents and offered to help insurgent defectors reintegrate into civilian life. Nigérien officials have asserted that necessary spending on defense and security has limited the domestic resources available for socioeconomic programs.

Niger has participated in multiple regional security initiatives, including the Nigeria-led Multinational Joint Task Force, the G5 Sahel "joint force" (comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger), and the Accra Initiative, which aims to prevent Islamist insurgent spillover into coastal West Africa. These efforts have arguably been plagued by distrust among leaders, a lack of military capacity and interoperability, and an emphasis on military offensives at the expense of civilian governance initiatives. Mali's decision to withdraw from the G5 Sahel in 2022 dealt a blow to that initiative. Niger also has had about 900 soldiers and police serving in the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali. In June 2023, Mali's junta demanded the mission's withdrawal, which is expected by late 2023.

Security force abuses and failures in the Sahel have arguably fueled local support for insurgents and coups, as has a growing popular rejection of France's role in the region. Bazoum, like his predecessor Issoufou, welcomed Western military cooperation. Unlike some of its neighbors, Niger has generally not armed ethnic militias or civilian vigilantes as a counterinsurgency tactic, and allegations of security force abuses have been rarer than in 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.

The Economy and Humanitarian Conditions

Niger is among the world's poorest and least developed countries. Limited arable land, high population growth, and natural disasters (namely, droughts and flooding) have fueled widespread food insecurity and malnutrition. Other health challenges include malaria and outbreaks of measles, meningitis, cholera, and polio. Child marriage and adolescent motherhood are common; access to education is limited, particularly for girls and in rural areas. Insecurity and displacement have further strained local communities and obstructed basic service delivery. Demographic pressures—Niger has the world's highest fertility rate—and the effects of climate change deepen Niger's challenges.

While the vast majority of Nigériens are engaged in agriculture and/or livestock herding, the formal economy centers on mining (particularly uranium and gold) and emergent oil production. Niger's role as a top global

uranium exporter is of strategic importance, particularly to France, which relies on uranium for domestic electricity and nuclear defense. The prominent role in Niger of a French state-controlled firm, Orano (ex-Areva), has long drawn criticism from local civil society groups, which also cite health and environmental concerns linked to mining.

Oil production began in the early 2010s, and is mostly used for domestic consumption; a new pipeline to Benin, built by a China-based firm to facilitate exports, has been expected to come online in late 2023. Niger also has coal and other mineral reserves. Amid successive Nigérien governments' efforts to diversify the sector, China-based firms have played a growing role in uranium mining, and are also key players in the oil and construction sectors. Turkey is also a prominent economic partner, particularly in construction.

U.S. Relations, Military Presence, and Aid

U.S. officials have condemned the military's "effort to seize power by force" and expressed support for President Bazoum. The Biden Administration previously sought to expand and deepen bilateral ties, citing Niger's democratic credentials and regional security role. In early 2023, Antony Blinken became the first U.S. Secretary of State to visit Niger, highlighting security and development cooperation. Many of the U.S. soldiers in Niger are located at facilities in Niamey and the northern city of Agadez, which host U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft. Congress explicitly authorized the U.S. Air Force to build the Agadez facility; ISR flights began there in 2019.

Congress has prohibited certain foreign assistance to the government—but not necessarily ISR or other military activities—in countries in which the military has ousted an elected leader. The Administration has yet to determine whether the prohibition applies to Niger. (See CRS In Focus IF11267, *Coup-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Appropriations*.) An active U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation compact with Niger and newly signed second compact are also at risk due to statutory eligibility criteria.

U.S. Aid. The United States allocated \$92 million in bilateral aid for Niger in FY2022 (latest available), with health and agriculture top areas of focus. The Administration has requested \$107 million for Niger in FY2024. Niger is a focus country for USAID's Feed the Future program and the President's Malaria Initiative. It is also completing a \$443 million MCC compact focusing on food security. U.S. security cooperation—largely provided under regional and global programs—includes State Department counterterrorism and peacekeeping assistance, Defense Department "global train-and-equip" support, and military exercises. Indiana's National Guard has a State Partnership Program with Niger's military.

U.S. Hostages. Jeffery Woodke, an American, was kidnapped from his home in western Niger in 2016 and freed in March 2023, reportedly from JNIM custody. An American nun who was kidnapped in Burkina Faso in early 2022 was released to Nigerien authorities later that year. Bazoum's government credited talks with Islamist militants. In 2020, U.S. military forces intervened in Nigeria to free a U.S. hostage who was seized in Niger.

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