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July 2023 coup in Niger

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In July 2023 military officers forcibly removed the democratically elected president of Niger, the sixth coup in West Africa in three years.¹

The UK Government, which earlier in the year described Niger as a “vital regional partner” during a ministerial visit by Andrew Mitchell, is supporting efforts by ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, [to return Niger to civilian rule: “we welcome the determination of ECOWAS to pursue all means to bring about a peaceful resolution.”](#)² ECOWAS has imposed sanctions and has said it will intervene militarily to restore constitutional order if diplomatic efforts fail.

¹ There have been coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (twice in 2022) and Guinea (2021). Commons Library briefing [Coups and political stability in West Africa](#) discusses some of the factors driving instability in the region.

² FCDO, [UK launches new Sahel Humanitarian Fund](#), 16 February 2023; FCDO, [Situation in Niger: UK statement](#), 11 August 2023

1 About Niger

Niger's trajectory since independence from France in 1960 has been "volatile", according to Sebastian Elischer, author and associate professor at the University of Florida.³ The military has held power for long periods, interspersed with civilian rule.⁴ However, Niger has been considered relatively stable in recent years, compared to its neighbours in the Sahel. In early 2021, Niger held its first democratic transfer of power since 1960, with the inauguration of former interior minister Mohamed Bazoum to the presidency following the end of President Issoufou's term in office.⁵

Niger has been a key western ally against Islamist militants in the Sahel; in early 2023 Antony Blinken made the first visit by a US Secretary of State to Niamey, the capital, describing Niger as a "model of resilience, a model of democracy, a model of cooperation".⁶ The coup raises questions for both France and the US, who maintain military forces in the country.

Niger is a low-income country and ranks near the bottom of the UN Human Development Index.⁷ The World Food Programme says over 4.3 million people (out of a population of 25.9 million) require humanitarian assistance in 2023.⁸

1

How did the coup occur?

On 26 July soldiers from the presidential guard detained President Mohamed Bazoum and announced the suspension of all institutions and the closure of borders. On 28 July, the head of the presidential guard, General Abdourahmane Tchiani, declared himself the leader of a new National Council for the Safeguarding of the Homeland (CNSP).⁹

³ Leonardo Villalon and others, *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel* (2021), p385

⁴ BBC News, [Country profile Niger](#), accessed 30 August 2023

⁵ [Niger's top court confirms Mohamed Bazoum's election win](#), Al Jazeera, 22 March 2021

⁶ US State Department, [Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Nigerien Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massoudou at a Joint Press Availability](#), 16 March 2023

⁷ World Bank Blogs, [World Bank Group country classifications by income level for FY24 \(July1, 2023, to June30, 2024\)](#), 30 June 2023

⁸ Relief Web, [World Food Programme Niger country brief July 2023](#), 28 August 2023

⁹ Crisis Group, [The attempted coup in Niger: Avoiding armed conflict](#), 7 August 2023

A spokesman for the coup leaders said they had acted because of the “continuing deterioration of the security situation, and poor economic and social governance”.¹⁰

President Bazoum has rejected accusations that his government failed to provide security. Writing in the Washington Post on 3 August, he argued: “Niger is now the safest it has been in the past 15 years” and warned that the coup will have a devastating impact on Niger’s economy.¹¹

However, close watchers of Niger suggest pre-existing tensions between the president and the military over the increasing presence of western military forces and the replacement of senior officers, may be more to blame.¹²

2 How have Nigeriens responded?

The new leaders appear to have popular support. Thousands demonstrated in support of the coup in the capital on Niger’s independence day on 3 August 2023. According to reports, Nigeriens criticised the response of regional leaders and demanded the departure of foreign troops (France and the US have military bases in Niger).¹³ In early September, thousands rallied in the capital calling for the withdrawal of French troops.¹⁴

However, a BBC reporter living in the capital says the mood on the streets is tense, with the military junta and its supporters pushing the line “You’re either with us or against us.” Access to electricity, food and money has been limited because of the ECOWAS-imposed sanctions.¹⁵

A survey conducted in autumn 2020 in Niger found widespread support for democracy and a rejection of military rule. Afrobarometer, a pan-African polling company, found 64% of respondents favour democracy, with a similar number rejecting military rule. However, only 42% of respondents said they were satisfied with the way democracy is working.¹⁶

¹⁰ BBC News, [Niger soldiers declare coup on national tv](#), 27 July 2023; BBC Monitoring, Text of TV statement announcing Niger coup, 27 July 2023

¹¹ Washington Post, [President of Niger: My country is under attack and I’ve been taken hostage](#), 3 August 2023

¹² Crisis Group, [The attempted coup in Niger: Avoiding armed conflict](#), 7 August 2023

¹³ BBC News, [Niger coup: Thousands march to support junta](#), 3 August 2023

¹⁴ France 24, [Thousands rally in Niger to demand the withdrawal of French troops](#), 2 September 2023

¹⁵ BBC News, [Niger journalist: I lie awake at night fearing they will arrest me](#), 26 August 2023

¹⁶ Afrobarometer, [PP85: Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren’t listening](#), 19 January 2023

3

Will ECOWAS use military force?

ECOWAS, the regional bloc of West African countries, has responded to the coup by imposing financial sanctions and closing borders.

Under the leadership of Nigerian President Tinubu, ECOWAS initially set a seven day deadline to reinstate Bazoum to the presidency.¹⁷ When that deadline passed, at an extraordinary meeting on 10 August, ECOWAS said it was committed to a peaceful resolution of the crisis, but also agreed to activate its standby force.¹⁸ Abdel-Fatau Musah, the ECOWAS commissioner for political affairs, peace and security, says the military option is “a measure of last resort.”¹⁹

However, it is not clear whether there is popular support in the region for a military intervention. In one poll, by Premise Data, 60% of respondents in Nigeria, Ghana and the Ivory Coast opposed the idea.²⁰

There is also the risk of a wider conflict; neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso, both led by military officers who also took power by force, have warned any such action could prompt a military response.²¹ On 16 September, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signed a mutual defence pact, forming the Alliance of Sahel States, which explicitly states an attack on one will be “be considered as an aggression against the other parties and shall give rise to a duty of assistance.”²² Both Mali and Burkina Faso have previously clashed with ECOWAS over the pace of their transition to democratically elected civilian-led governments.²³

President Tinubu said all diplomatic options would be exhausted before any military intervention.²⁴ He has proposed a nine-month transition; ECOWAS has already rejected the CNSP’s suggestion of a three-year transition to civilian rule.²⁵

¹⁷ ECOWAS, [Final communique – Fifty First Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on the political situation in Niger](#), 30 July 2023

¹⁸ ECOWAS, [Final Communique – Second Extraordinary Summit Of The Ecowas Authority Of Heads Of State And Government On The Political Situation In Niger](#), 10 August 2023

¹⁹ The Africa Report, Exclusive: ECOWAS commissioner Musah speaks on Niger coup, 16 August 2023

²⁰ The Economist, West African views on Niger’s coup, 24 April 2023

²¹ BBC Monitoring, Briefing: Mali, Burkina Faso back Niger junta, warn against foreign intervention, 1 August 2023; [Al Jazeera, Burkina Faso, Mali warn against military intervention in Niger](#), 1 August 2023

²² France 24, Mali, [Niger and Burkina Faso military leaders establish securityv alliance](#), 16 September 2023

²³ See Commons Library briefings [Burkina Faso: Second coup of 2022](#), CBP 9633 and [Mali: Why have elections been delayed until 2024?](#), CBP 9636

²⁴ Premium Times, [Niger coup: Tinubu insists military intervention last resort](#), 1 September 2023

²⁵ BBC News, [Niger coup leader Gen Tchiani promises to handover in power in three years](#), 20 August 2023

4 How has the UK Government responded?

The UK Government condemns “in the strongest possible terms attempts to undermine democracy, peace and stability in Niger.”²⁶ The Foreign Secretary says the [UK supports an African and ECOWAS led resolution](#) to the situation:

The United Kingdom supports the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in calling for the restoration of constitutional order and democracy in Niger. We welcome the determination of ECOWAS to pursue all means to bring about a peaceful resolution. We stand in support of democracy in Niger.²⁷

The Government has issued several statements since the coup took place:

- [Violence in Niger: UK statement](#), 26 July 2023
- [Situation in Niger: UK statement](#), 30 July 2023
- [Situation in Niger: UK statement](#), 11 August 2023

In recent years the UK had deepened its relations with Niger, opening a new embassy in 2020 and supporting stabilisation activities through the [Conflict, Stability and Security Fund programme](#).²⁸ Following the coup, the UK has suspended long-term development assistance to Niger. It continues to provide critical humanitarian aid.²⁹

In February 2023, during a three-day visit to the country, Andrew Mitchell, Minister for Development and Africa, announced a Sahel Regional Fund, committing £33 million over the three years to 2026. At the time, he described Niger as a “vital regional partner”.³⁰

5 What does the coup mean for political stability in the region?

Niger is the latest country in the region to have its leaders forcibly removed from power. Nigerian President Tinubu, who has spoken out against the

²⁶ [PQ198705 \[West Africa: Peacekeeping Operations\]](#), 19 September 2023

²⁷ FCDO, [Situation in Niger: UK statement](#), 11 August 2023

²⁸ FCDO, [Sahel programme summary 2021 to 2022](#), 19 May 2023

²⁹ [PQ198133 \[Niger: Politics and Government\]](#), 15 September 2023

³⁰ FCDO, [UK launches new Sahel Humanitarian Fund](#), 16 February 2023

forceful removal of a democratic government, fears militaries in other countries may copy the example of Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and others.³¹

Abdel-Fatau Musah, the ECOWAS commissioner for political affairs, peace and security, has similarly warned of “contagion developing as far as coups are concerned.”³²

The UK Government has previously discussed the risk of violent extremism spreading from Mali to the coastal countries of West Africa and causing instability.³³

France, a former colonial ruler of many countries in the region, faces further questions about its Africa policy.³⁴ On 24 September President Macron announced France will withdraw its ambassador and end military cooperation with Niger, following demands by Niger’s new military leaders to do so.³⁵

Russia’s mercenary Wagner Group has been developing a presence in the Sahel, particularly under the military leaderships in Mali and Burkina Faso. The UK Government says it has “not seen evidence of Wagner involvement in recent developments in Niger.”³⁶ Yevgeny Prigozhin blamed the coup in Niger on the legacy of colonialism and suggested Wagner soldiers could “establish order”.³⁷ It is not yet clear what the Wagner Group’s future is in Africa following Prigozhin’s death on 23 August 2023.

³¹ Premium Times, [Niger coup: Tinubu insists military intervention last resort](#), 1 September 2023; [‘We Won’t Accept Coup d’etat In West Africa Again,’ Tinubu Declares As New ECOWAS Chairman](#), Sahara Reporters, 9 July 2023

³² The Africa Report, Exclusive: ECOWAS commissioner Musah speaks on Niger coup, 16 August 2023

³³ [HC Deb 14 November 2022 c401](#)

³⁴ BBC News, [Macron looks on as France’s Africa policy crumbles](#), 2 September 2023

³⁵ France 24, [Thousands rally in Niger to demand the withdrawal of French troops](#), 2 September 2023; BBC News, [Niger coup: Macron says France to withdraw troops and ambassador](#), 25 September 2023

³⁶ [PQ199604 \[Niger: Military coups\]](#), 22 September 2023

³⁷ CNN, [Prigozhin celebrates Niger coup, says his Wagner group can help](#), 29 July 2023

2 Further reading

- Leonardo A. Villalón, [Niger coup: Military takeover is a setback for democracy and US interests in West Africa](#), The Conversation, 29 July 2023
- Landry Signé and Adrianna Pita, [What underlies the coup in Niger?](#) Brookings, 9 August 2023
- [The attempted coup in Niger: Avoiding armed conflict](#), Crisis Group, 7 August 2023
- Paul Melly, [Niger coup underlines challenge to democracy across Africa](#), Chatham House, 18 August 2023
- Yvan Guichaoua and Nina Wilen, [A coup like no other: Three reasons why the coup in Niger is different from previous coups in the Sahel \(and why it's very serious\)](#), Democracy in Africa, 28 August 2023
- Giles Yabi, [The Niger coup's outsized global impact](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 August 2023
- [Season of putsch: Why have coups become so popular in Africa?](#) Al Jazeera, 1 September 2023
- Ebenezer Obadare, [The real meaning of Niger's coup](#), Foreign Affairs, 1 September 2023
- [What's driving Africa's coups? Foreign Policy](#), Foreign Policy, 3 September 2023

Commons Library briefings

- [Coups and political stability in West Africa](#), CBP 9861
- [UK military in the Sahel: Developments in 2022](#), CBP 9634
- [Burkina Faso: Second coup of 2022](#), CBP 9633
- [Mali: Why have elections been delayed until 2024?](#), CBP 9636

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