



Why the U.S. Hasn't Declared a Coup in Niger

William Rampe

August 11, 2023

Niger, a key U.S. ally in Western Africa, is undergoing a political crisis that has raised questions about the United States' role in fostering foreign militaries in the name of fighting terrorism.

On July 26, Niger's presidential guards, headed by Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani, detained Mohamed Bazoum, Niger's democratically-elected president, and declared "an end to the regime that you know due to the deteriorating security situation and bad governance." The new junta, officially titled the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland, consolidated its control by suspending the constitution, dissolving all government institutions, and closing Niger's borders.

The move drew outrage from a plethora of nations. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) condemned the "attempted coup d'état" and called for the immediate reinstatement of Bazoum while also instituting sanctions and threatening military intervention.

"The EU condemns in the strongest possible terms the coup d'état in Niger. The past days' events constitute a serious attack on stability and democracy in Niger," the European Union wrote in a press release.

The U.S. struck a similar tune as ECOWAS and the E.U., condemning Bazoum's overthrow and calling for the restoration of Niger's democracy while also suspending partnered activities with the Nigerien military. "We strongly condemn any effort to detain or subvert the functioning of Niger's democratically elected government, led by President Bazoum," said U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in a statement.

But unlike ECOWAS and the E.U., the U.S. has neglected to call the overthrow a "coup" to avoid the legal ramifications of that declaration. According to Section 7008 of the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, the U.S. is prohibited from sending foreign aid "to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d'état or decree," with an exception if the aid "is in the national security interest of the United States."

"I think when the State Department hesitates in [declaring a coup], what it's trying to do is just keep its options open so that we can dial back our security assistance, perhaps on a temporary measure in the hopes of being able to restore democracy in the country or some semblance of

democracy, civilian rule and so that we can keep that security assistance going," explained Cameron Hudson, a senior associate for the Africa program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in an interview with [NPR](#).

The Biden administration's reluctance to label the overthrow a coup is unsurprising considering the United States' significant security commitment to Niger. Presently, Niger hosts [1,100 U.S. troops](#), an increase of [900 percent](#) since 2013. Those troops train and support Nigerien soldiers and run a \$110 million [drone base](#), which the Nigerien junta has restricted. The U.S. has [invested](#) \$158 million in arms sales and \$122 million in security assistance to Niger since the Trump administration began.

"The U.S. has wanted to have a role in West Africa largely because of great power competition. Because of that, Niger is one of a few countries that receive a lot of U.S. military assistance," says Jordan Cohen, a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute. "The U.S. is unlikely to call it a coup because once it does that, that assistance has to freeze."

By maintaining this flexibility, the Biden administration can avoid reducing its military footprint in Niger, even as it repeats platitudes about democracy. This is a trend for the administration, which refused to label the 2021 transfer of power in Chad between the deceased president Idriss Déby and his son Mahamat a [military coup](#) so that it could continue providing [security assistance](#) to fight jihadists.

While the U.S. has [temporarily suspended](#) some of Niger's aid, without the statutorily required cessation that comes with the coup label, the Biden administration is free to continue aid as it sees fit. Cutting off the flow will likely depend on factors other than democracy.

"Maybe the new government tries to cozy up to China, in which case I think the U.S. probably does cut security aid, but if the military is going to continue working with the United States, everybody's going to forget about this and the aid will continue," suggests Cohen.

Egypt provides a model for a junta that remained in the good graces of the United States. After Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi was overthrown by the military in 2013 (which the U.S. never officially called a [coup](#)), the Obama administration [suspended](#) "only a couple hundred million dollars in U.S. military aid" while still maintaining the majority of the aid. In 2015, the administration [restored](#) Egypt's aid to fight the Islamic State.

"The U.S. sees Niger as such a critical player in providing regional stability that it really wants to continue providing assistance to the country," explains Stephanie Savell, co-director for the Costs of War project at Brown University. "There's been precedent for this under the Obama administration as well, where there was a coup that was never labeled as such."

It's also not clear that U.S. security aid benefits regional security, given the tendency for the U.S. military to [train](#) future coup leaders. "The Niger coup marks yet another occasion in which U.S.-trained military personnel—the officers that we are educating and training—have sponsored or directly supported an antidemocratic coup," noted Emma Ashford, a senior fellow with the Reimagining U.S. Grand Strategy program at the Stimson Center, in an interview with [Foreign Policy](#). "These aren't just low-level troops who've been trained in combat techniques. These are

often coup leaders, the cream of the crop of foreign militaries, trained here in the United States at our top service academies."

"Part of what the U.S. spending on security assistance has done is fund hundreds of billions into the security forces, and that has contributed to this balance of powers in these governments," adds Savell. "They have essentially given both military and security forces more power and more clout in comparison to other parts of the government."

If the U.S. wants to promote democracy, it should rightly call the military takeover in Niger a coup and re-evaluate its military commitments in the Sahel.