

Niger Coup Raises Questions About U.S. Sahel Strategy

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Security in Africa's Sahel region is in the U.S. interest, and it is undermined by instability and coups that have become common since President Biden took office.

Niger's 2011 democratic transition was a regional success, but the July 2023 coup underscores America's lost influence in the region, threatening more instability.

Restoring U.S. influence to prevent terrorism and an even greater migration crisis and pushing back against malign influences requires a revitalized Sahel strategy.

The July coup that overthrew Niger's democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum marks the latest setback for democracy and regional stability in the Sahel, a central-Saharan-desert region stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. It is a region where the United States has dramatically ceded influence since 2021 after years of substantial military and economic assistance to counter a multitude of transnational terrorist threats. The Sahel has witnessed 13 coup attempts—six successful—in the past 30 months.¹

A secure Sahel matters to the U.S., as should American partners in democracy, and this military coup in Niger merits greater attention, given the potential for increased extremism and terrorism, costly humanitarian responses, and unsustainable and disruptive migration flows. The U.S. must re-evaluate its failed approach to the Sahel, specifically, and Africa, in general.

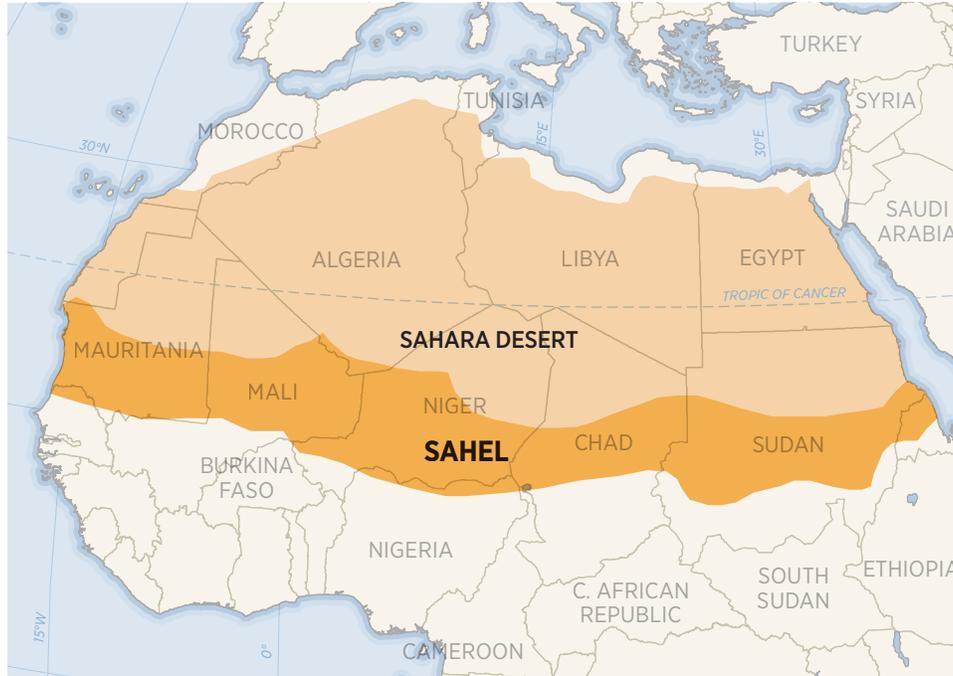
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MAP 1

Sahel Region of the Sahara Desert



SOURCE: WorldAtlas, "Sahel of Africa: Countries of the Sahel," <https://www.worldatlas.com/regions/sahel-of-africa.html> (accessed October 31, 2023).

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What Happened in Niger, and Why Does It Matter?

On July 26, a military-led group deposed the democratically elected president of Niger—a landlocked northwestern African state that forms part of the Sahel’s “Sahara shoreline”—and placed the country under paramilitary control.

Months later, the situation remains unsettled. In Niger, military leaders have assumed total government control, and President Bazoum remains under house arrest, allegedly awaiting trial for alleged crimes of high treason.² On July 30, thousands of protesters took to the streets to denounce France, which is evacuating its 1,500 counterterrorism forces (an acknowledgement of unresolved colonial-era animosities), and concurrently cheered Russia (evidence of the paramilitary Wagner Group’s influence in a country that has been America’s principal regional anti-terrorism partner).³

Initial responses by the U.S. and allies condemned the military's actions and included a tepid visit by Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland. State Department communications refrained from formally labeling the overthrow a "coup" until mid-October—a designation that legally obligates the U.S. to immediately cease further U.S. aid to, and anti-terrorism cooperation with, the country, and risks closing diplomatic channels. Dialogue remains stalled, the U.S. and other Western embassies have evacuated personnel, and the Department of Defense is signaling the withdrawal of its in-country counterterrorism presence and leaving the future of its air base in question.⁴

Initially, the regional bloc Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) declared its intention to restore democratic rule to Niger.⁵ Neighboring Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali threatened a multinational military response to restore President Bazoum to office, but little visible action has followed.

The United States should address Niger's struggle more robustly. The U.S. relationship includes more than \$1.3 billion in U.S. aid since 2018, a significant counterterrorism investment, and the construction of the largest airbase facility in the region. As such, Niger represents a key security partner and holds a critical role in stabilizing the broader Sahel region beset by jihadist terror groups. Niger had served an important example for democracy: Though imperfect, Niger's transition from military rule in 2011 was a model for advancing regional democratic governance ideals, and thereby U.S. national security, by buttressing a regional security partnership that could hold malign influences at bay. A civilian-led government was something in which the U.S. had made important political and financial investments—which may now be squandered.

The Greater Sahel Challenge

Following the termination of a fledgling democracy and the evacuation of U.S. embassy personnel, American policymakers must confront questions about the U.S. Africa strategy and reassess the effectiveness of the U.S. approach in a pivotal region. It must begin with the Biden Administration's "U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa,"⁶ which lays out a generic vision for the continent while ignoring its cultural and ethnic differences and unique development challenges in favor of politicized talking points.

A disturbing pattern has thus emerged that undermines U.S. national interests. Niger's nascent democratic transition represented an opportunity to serve as an example for its Sahelian peers and included a "historic" visit by Secretary of State Antony Blinken just last March. Sudan had a similar

profile after signing the 2020 Abraham Accords during the Trump Administration. But it, too, is now in turmoil after the 2021 coup of its civilian-led government, adding to the Sahel's instability.⁷

These negative developments highlight the stark realities of the region: increasing radicalism and the expansion of terrorism and generational economic and development stagnation. The Sahel suffers from high poverty rates with about 80 percent of the Sahel's population living on less than \$2 a day.⁸ Emergency-level food insecurity,⁹ unreliable access to electricity and infrastructure, and a regional refugee crisis¹⁰ further stress Sahel communities. With much of the region scoring in the bottom 5 percent¹¹ of the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index and rated "mostly unfree" or "repressed" by The Heritage Foundation's annual *Index of Economic Freedom*,¹² political and security obstacles prevent the people of the Sahel from tackling these underlying health, economic, and development issues. Hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid to alleviate poverty have been wasted.

The importance of a secure Sahel is unmistakable. Absent increased stability, the migration crisis and corresponding terrorist threat will worsen. A secure Sahel is therefore key to U.S. counterterrorism efforts and to the stability of neighbors in West Africa and Europe, which is suffering from historic spikes in asylum requests. And, the United States is not immune to this threat here at home given its border crisis. Stability is the required foundation for achieving better economic outcomes to temper emigration. Stability also means protecting energy supply chains for the region's oil and uranium exports. Niger's coup adds to those in Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan in less than three years. Yet, since Niger's July 26 coup, African and Western diplomatic efforts have not resulted in any visible gains, and the military leaders in Niamey appear unmoved.

The U.S. Is Failing the Sahel

The military coups in the Sahel over the past three years demonstrate America's marked decline in foreign influence in Africa. This decline imperils democracy across the continent. Yet the Biden Administration seems paralyzed, still emphasizing an ideological agenda detached from African economic needs. What was billed as the White House's "charm offensive" across Africa has fallen flat, and the Biden Administration appears unable to modify its strategy.

In contrast, the previous Administration's "peace through strength" approach made clear to malign actors the risks of undercutting U.S. national

security interests. But today, it is evident that the White House has lost its muscle. With neither a defined leadership role nor a public appetite to engage, significant questions about the Biden Administration's commitment to the Sahel remain unanswered. For the moment, the Biden Administration appears reluctant to define what exactly America's national interest is in the Sahel or which outcomes it seeks to achieve.

Recommendations for the Administration

Restoring U.S. influence in the Sahel will be difficult, as regional frustration with Europe is high and instability shows no signs of fading. But a secure Sahel is important to U.S. interests, global stability, and to maintaining the credibility of the democratic-capitalist model of development versus the authoritarian alternatives. Therefore, the U.S. should:

- **Restore American leadership.** The Biden Administration's changes weakened U.S. influence in the Sahel. The Administration would be better served by resuming the effective engagement tools from its predecessor: clear positions and consequences for bad behavior, dedicated envoys, commercial diplomacy, and transaction-based relationships over unwelcome social agendas, such as the "climate crisis" and "social inclusion."
- **Regain credibility.** While Russia continues to expand its influence throughout the Sahel, coups in Niger, Sudan, and elsewhere point to a disconnection between the Administration's rhetoric of partnership with Africa and the on-the-ground realities that have led to evacuations of U.S. embassies and military personnel. Regaining U.S. credibility begins with understanding the region's challenges, such as food insecurity, insufficient health care, and scarce foreign direct investment, and tailoring working relationships with African and allied governments to address them.
- **Readjust its Africa strategy.** Any new strategy requires greater nuance by country and region. It is unrealistic to approach a continent as diverse as Africa with a broad policy brush. More attention is required at the regional level to meet specific security and development needs. An adjusted Africa strategy would set clear outcomes to define a successful relationship—and consequences for activities that counter U.S. interests. For the Sahel, specifically, restoring dedicated

bilateral envoys to address crisis situations and negotiate next steps marks a sensible first step.

- **Re-engage using commercial diplomacy.** Long-term stability requires solving the region's longer-term development challenges, which in turn require greater economic prosperity. The Administration must refocus on commercial objectives and leverage the power of the U.S. private sector to spur more trade with and investment in the region. It can do so in part by reviving Prosper Africa's market-driven mandate, an initiative launched in 2018,¹³ which has recently faced questions about its focus.

Conclusion

The Biden Administration has been unable to balance the Sahel's aspirations for democracy with the practicalities of a delicate region that is working to stabilize its political institutions against external antidemocratic influences and extremist threats.

Restoring American leadership in the region is paramount to maintaining global security. Without a frank reassessment of its Africa strategy, the Biden Administration will only further fail the people of the Sahel and enable malign influences to fill the void to the detriment of U.S. national interests—thus failing the American people as well.

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Endnotes

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