

# The US Is Caught in a Dilemma with Niger. Scott Ritter

Washington can't sever relations with the post-coup government lest it lose the basis for its military presence in the African country

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*Last week, Acting Deputy Secretary of State for the United States Victoria Nuland made her third visit to Niger in the past two years.*

This time, Nuland was in the African country to respond to the July 26 military coup, which saw the ouster of the constitutionally-elected President Mohamed Bazoum by a group of military officers, operating under the umbrella of the newly-formed National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland, led by the commander of the presidential guard, General Abdourahmane Tchiani, who subsequently declared himself to be the new head of state.

Nuland had sought a meeting with the ousted president, Bazoum, as well as the leader of the new military government, General Tchiani. She was denied both, and instead held a very strained dialogue with Tchiani's military chief, General Moussa Salaou Barmou, who headed a delegation of lesser officers. Nuland called the talks with Barmou "*frank*" and "*difficult*." What she did not do, however, was call a spade a spade, refusing to label the Nigerien coup a coup, but rather treating it as temporary domestic political mishap which, with a little bit of US-applied pressure from the right source, could be overcome.

The reasoning behind the American game of semantics is that, by law, if the US recognizes the Nigerien coup as a coup, then it must cease all military-to-military interactions between a force of some 1,100 US military personnel currently stationed in Niger, and their Nigerien military counterparts, as well as all other forms of US-funded aid. The law in question, known as Section 7008 (of Public Law 117-328, Division K), specifically states that no funds appropriated by Congress in support of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs (SFOPS) "*shall be obligated or expended to finance directly any assistance to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military*

*coup d'état or decree."*

During her 2-hour discussions with the Tchiani government delegation, Nuland made it clear that while US relations were currently suspended, they were not permanently halted. In a post-meeting video press conference, Nuland emphasized the consequences of the failure to return President Bazoum to power with General Barmou, a Nigerien special forces officer who had been trained at US military schools and had extensive interaction with US military trainers in Niger. Barmou's personal experience with the US military is in many ways the personification of a relationship that today serves as the foundation of America's military presence and mission in West Africa.

The US, France, and other European partners have been engaged in a years-long campaign, together with their West African partners, to combat Islamic extremism in the Sahel region of Africa. Niger, which hosts two major US bases, one outside the Nigerien capital of Niamey known as Base 101, and a second, Air Base 201, in Agadez - a city located on the southern edge of the Sahara. Both bases support US intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations conducted by MQ-9 Reaper drones and fixed-wing aircraft flown by a Joint Special Operations Aviation Detachment, as well as other US military operations, including military airlift and special forces training detachments (France also maintains a significant military presence in Niger, numbering over 1,000, and there are several hundred other military personnel from a variety of European Union (EU) nations.

With the collapse of the US, French, EU, and United Nations military presence in neighboring Mali, and in the aftermath of a military coup in Chad, Niger has emerged as the last remaining bastion of the US-led anti-terrorism effort in the Sahel. If the US were to cut relations with Niger because of the coup, there would be no Western-oriented anti-terrorism efforts remaining to counter the threat of Al Qaeda and Islamic State terrorism in the region.

From Washington's perspective, the greatest threat that would emerge from any break in the military-to-military assistance between the US and Niger is not the potential spread of Islamic fundamentalist-inspired terrorism, but rather Russian influence, especially in the form of military security support allegedly provided by Wagner Group, a private military company whose African operations appear to operate in sync with Russian foreign policy objectives (neither the Kremlin nor the Tchiani government has commented on the reports of Wagner activities in Niger).

Prior to last month's Russian-African Summit, Prigozhin had met with Wagner forces who had relocated to Belarus in the aftermath of the abortive June 23-24 insurrection - which resulted in halting Wagner operations in Donbass - during which he emphasized the importance Africa would play in future Wagner activities. Wagner's presence has been reported in several African countries, including the [Central African Republic](#), Libya, and Mali. Members of the senior leadership of the Nigerien coup have reportedly met with Wagner officials in Mali, to discuss security cooperation between Wagner and Niger. During her meeting with the Nigerien coup government, Victoria Nuland singled out the potential deployment of Wagner into Niger as a worrisome development and indicated that she pressed upon her Nigerien counterparts her assessment regarding the detrimental role played by Wagner regarding African security. The reported meeting between Wagner and Niger representatives indicates that Nuland's message did not resonate with her Nigerien hosts.

The US appears to be caught in the horns of a dilemma, trying to balance a desire to maintain relations with a nation whose government cannot legally receive US aid, and the consequences that would accrue if US-Niger relations were severed, as required by Section 7008. There is an option that neither Nuland nor her boss, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, have yet given voice to. In early 2003, the US Congress amended Section 7008 to provide for the Secretary of State to seek a waiver on the grounds of the “*national security interests of the United States.*”

There are two major obstacles for the US when it comes to any such waiver. First is the amount of political capital that the US has expended in trying to return President Bazoum to power – to reverse now would be the kind of nod to Realpolitik that the Biden administration is loath to do. Second is the fact that Niger, having evaluated its options going forward, may no longer be interested in maintaining the close relations it previously enjoyed with the US. Niger, like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea before it, has thrown off the mantle of its post-colonial relationship with France, a relationship that was closely linked with US national security policy in West Africa and the Sahel. The clock is ticking on the fate of US-Niger relations, and there seems to be little Victoria Nuland or any American official can do to change the outcome.

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