

Why has Niger declared U.S. military presence in its territory illegal?

written by Pavan Kulkarni
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A Boeing C-17 Globemaster III takes off June 19, 2021, at Air Base 201 in Niger.

Photo: U.S. Air Force Airman 1st Class Jan K. Valle

Niger declared the U.S. military deployment in its territory “illegal” on Saturday, March 16, after a U.S. delegation allegedly threatened “retaliation” against the largest country in West Africa for its ties with Russia and Iran.

Confronted with the prospect of losing three strategically crucial military bases, including one of the world’s largest drone bases in the central Nigerien city of Agadez on which it has [spent a quarter billion dollars](#), the U.S. is yet to give a statement in response. A press conference that was scheduled on Sunday at the U.S. embassy in Niger’s capital Niamey — outside which [protesters had gathered on Saturday](#) to denounce American interference — was [canceled](#).

“We are in touch” with Niger’s government “and will provide further updates as warranted,” is all that the U.S. State Department’s Spokesperson Matthew Miller has been able to muster so far in response via a [post on his X](#) account.

The lack of response well over three days after its military presence was declared illegal betrays a state of surprise over this action of Niger’s transitional military government, the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP).

In December, Niger’s former colonizer France was forced to withdraw all its troops from the country. This followed an order by the CNSP, which was formed in late July 2023 after the ouster of the then-president, Mohamed Bazoum.

Mass demonstrations welcomed the military coup against Bazoum, who had reinforced his domestic image as a French puppet by cracking down on protests demanding the withdrawal of the French troops.

General Abdourahamane Tchiani, the then chief of the Presidential guard who had led the coup, went on to form the CNSP with popular support including from the trade unions and the protest movement against French presence.

France initially refused to comply when the CNSP terminated Niger's military agreements with it in August and ordered the withdrawal of its troops. However, after a tense standoff for over a month, during which increasingly angry protests became an almost daily feature outside the French base and its embassy, France stood down in September and withdrew its troops by December. The smaller deployments of other EU countries also withdrew on the heels of France.

France's attempt to mobilize the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) into a war against Niger failed to materialize. It has left the bloc in an existential crisis, facing the prospect of losing half of its land area after Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger announced their withdrawal in January 2024.

Distancing itself from the tensions in the capital city during the stand-off with France, the U.S., which had about 1,100 troops in Niger at the time, repositioned some of its assets and troops from Airbase 101 in Niamey over 900 kilometers away to Airbase 201 in Agadez in September.

'We've invested hundreds of millions of dollars into bases there'

Sprawling over an area of 25 sq. km, Airbase 201, operational since 2019, is the [largest ever construction undertaken by the U.S. Air Force](#) at a cost of USD 110 million. Its maintenance costs approximately USD 30 million annually. Since the start of construction in 2016, the U.S. has spent USD 250 million on this base, *The Intercept* [reported](#) last September.

With [C17 transport planes and a fleet of drones, including unmanned combat aerial vehicles \(UCAVs\)](#) such as the MQ-9 Reaper, it is the second largest U.S. base in Africa after the one in Djibouti.

Soon after the ouster of Bazoum, the U.S. had readied a contingency plan to evacuate this base. However, "the goal is to stay" in both the bases — in Niamey as

well as in Agadez — General James Hecker, U.S.AF commander for Europe and Africa, had [explained](#) in August.

Apart from the Pentagon-run airbase 101 in Niger's southwest and 201 in its central region, the CIA has also been running another base further to the northeast in the small oasis town of Dirkou. The existence of such a base was a secret until it was exposed in 2018.

"All I know is they're American," a tight-lipped Bazoum, the regime's interior minister in 2018, told the NYT when asked about this base. It's always good. If people see things like that, they'll be scared," Boubakar Jerome, the then mayor of the town with a population of a few thousand, added in his comment, casually betraying how the regime entertained foreign military presence to keep its own population in fear.

When this regime was ousted in July 2023, with Bazoum at its helm as President since 2021, much was at stake for the U.S. Until October, it had not even declared his removal and the takeover by the CNSP a 'coup' because "we don't want to see that partnership go," U.S. Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh told a press conference in August. We've invested hundreds of millions of dollars into bases there."

Barely two months after it finally designated the CNSP's takeover as a coup in October, which kicked in laws restricting aid and military support to Niger, Molly Phee, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, offered to restore both to Niger.

After meeting with the CNSP-appointed ministers in December, when the size of U.S. deployment was [reduced from 1,100 to 648](#), Phee told a press conference, "I have made clear to the CNSP that we want to be a good partner again, but the CNSP has to be a good partner to the United States."

Niger, it seemed, was not particularly keen on the U.S. partnership. Like in neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso, the presence of Western troops in Niger for nearly a decade only saw an increase in the spread of violence by Islamist insurgencies they were ostensibly deployed to fight after spawning them across the Sahel by destroying Libya in 2011.

The West continues to pressure the transitional military governments in these countries to hold elections. However, the reality on the ground is that the majority of the people will be left out of the voting process because these states have lost control of vast territories to insurgencies over the last decade under the security ambit of the Western troops. France is even accused of providing support to these very groups after being ordered out of these countries.

Under the circumstances, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger — which [came together to form the Alliance of Sahel States \(AES\)](#) last September — are exploring alternative security relations, including with Russia.

It is a very popular idea, evidenced in the frequent occasions during the anti-French protests when Russian flags were waived with the Nigerien tricolor, often alongside the flags of other BRICS countries.

However, Molly Phee, who flew back to Niger on March 12 with a delegation including Michael Langley, the commander general of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), allegedly threatened “retaliation” against Niger in a meeting with the CNSP-appointed ministers.

To justify this threat of aggression, Phee also falsely accused Niger of entering into a secret agreement with Iran to supply it with Uranium, the CNSP spokesperson, Colonel Major Amadou Abdramane, said in a [speech](#) televised on Saturday.

“It is widely known that the exploitation of Niger’s Uranium is completely controlled

by France,” he said, condemning Phee’s accusation as a lie “reminiscent” of the weapons-of-mass-destruction claim peddled ahead of the Iraq war. “The international community still remembers the false evidence brandished by” the U.S. “before the Security Council to justify American aggression” on Iraq, he added.

‘U.S. had unilaterally imposed its military on Niger’

Reiterating that Niger deals with Russia “state-to-state, in accordance with the military cooperation agreements signed with the previous government,” Abdramane went on to insist that it is the presence of the U.S. troops and bases in Niger that is “illegal.”

“[T]hrough a simple verbal note (in 2012)... the American side unilaterally imposed on Niger an agreement on the status of United States personnel and civilian employees of the American Department of Defense,” he said.

Describing this agreement as “profoundly unfair” and against “the aspirations and interests of the Nigerien people,” he announced that this agreement stands revoked “with immediate effect.”

Source: [Peoples Dispatch](#)

